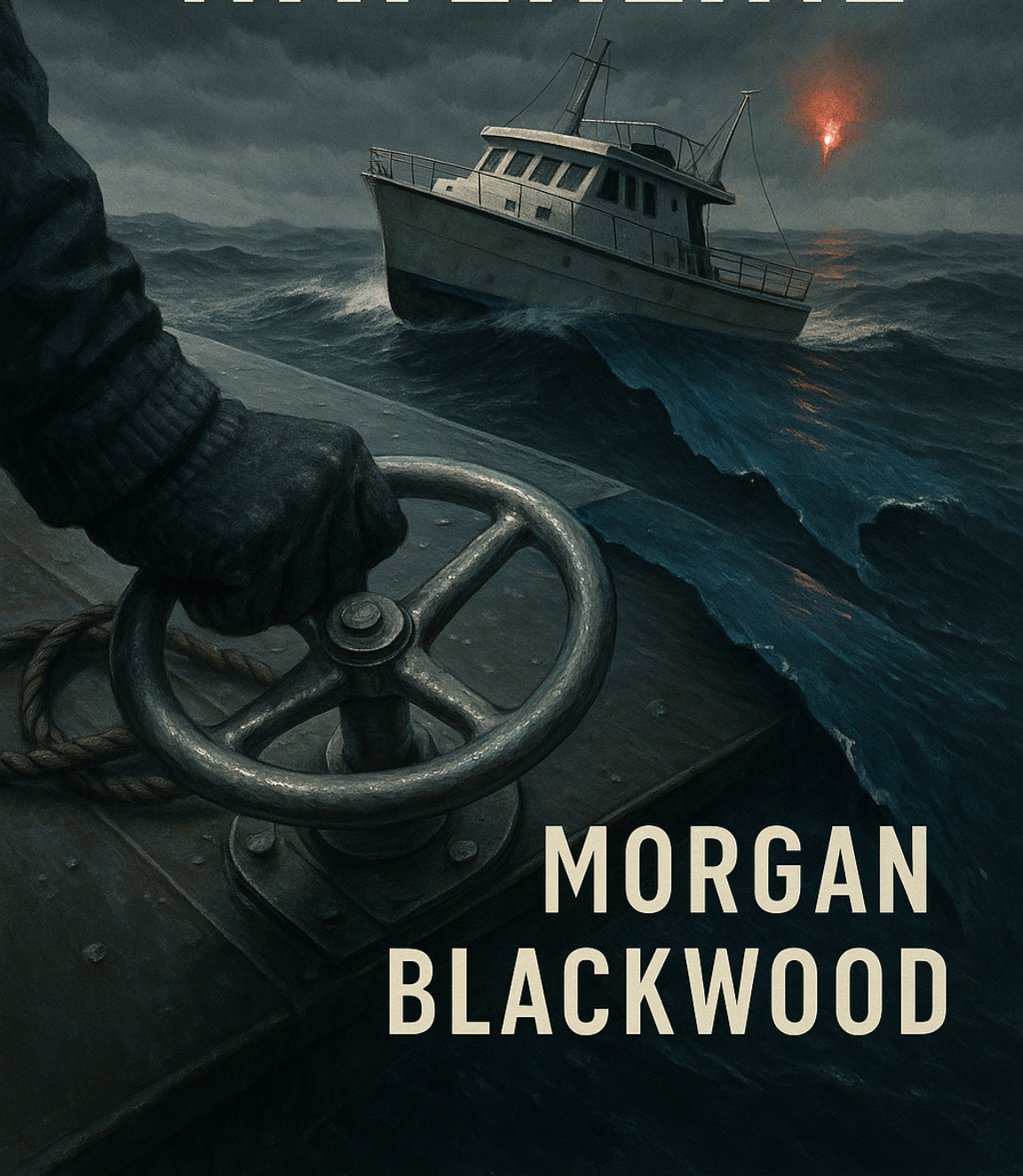


# BELOW THE WATERLINE



MORGAN  
BLACKWOOD

# **Below the Waterline**

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# Chapter 1

## Departure Load

Calyptra sat against the low concrete with her lines stiff and wet, a strip of wind-driven ripple along the dock. The air was raw and clean, cold enough to reach through jacket seams. Diesel hung faint in the inlet even with the engine off. Under the cabin sole, the battery monitor ticked a single green bar across to steady.

Liv stood on the foredeck, boots spread on the damp nonskid, the deck cool through rubber. A gull cut past without a sound. Her phone buzzed in her pocket with the last forecast Sophie had pulled clean. The window had shrunk to hours. Flags along the quay eased, then snapped back. The chop ran tighter between posts. Her jaw settled. One line in the ledger: leave now and buy hours. There was work and there was talk. Only time for one.

She counted one-two-three under her breath and looked down the length of the boat to the dock where gear stood sorted. Blue crates stacked with labels in Sharpie. The canisters for the ice cores waiting in a tight huddle near the gangway, insulated lids clamped and taped. Rhea had her palm on one and her other hand on a thermometer clipped into a port. The display showed a band she could live with, but not for long.

Ilya set the epoxy kit down with both hands and rolled his shoulders. The case was the old model with a dent at one corner and a strip of faded tape near the latches. Its weight made a mark in his stance. He eased it onto the concrete, looked at Liv, then back to the case, his mouth set.

“Leave it,” Liv said. Her voice stayed low, enough to be heard without carrying along the dock. “We don’t have the window for it.”

Ilya straightened. He was broad through the chest without bulk, a body made for tight spaces and awkward angles. Dark hair pushed under a knit cap. He lifted his chin toward the kit. "It is not spare. It is the thing you wish you had every time you do not carry it."

"We are not staying to rearrange the boat for an hour." Liv watched the inlet mouth where the water moved differently past the headland, longer strokes, colder color. "The runs on the forecast give us a gap. We use it. We can't afford to sit here arguing and watch it shut."

"It has saved us," Ilya said. "Not in stories. On water." He did not raise his voice. He did not need to. He kept his hand on the case.

Liv nodded once to the case, once to him. "Not this time."

He let out a short breath. "We are going to regret this and it will not matter who said what."

"It will matter that we left now," she said. "Move the dry stores forward and low. Anything heavy goes into the fore lockers. We shave drag while the wind holds."

"Copy," Kai said from behind her. He came up with a coil of webbing on his shoulder and that restless, efficient energy and a habit of taking on more. Hair tied back, hands already nicked from the morning. He had been up the mast to check the lights before breakfast and had not looked winded. He looked at the epoxy case, then at Liv. "We're not taking that?"

"No."

"That's the patch," he said. "If we take something below. It's the only thing that works when it matters."

"We are not carrying what we do not have time to stow and secure." Liv kept her voice even. "The donor wants these cores on a schedule. We meet it and we get invited back next season. We sit and we explain why we chose caution; we don't get that invite. Not how this year looks."

Kai's mouth set. Not a smile, not a frown. "So we're trusting hull and weather."

“We’re trusting a plan and a window,” Liv said. “We’re not trusting luck.”

Sophie came up from the cabin with a knit neck warmer pushed down under her chin and a tablet held against her chest. The wind had lifted her hair into frizz. Freckles stood out hard in the cold. “Comms are already patchy out past the point,” she said. “I can’t guarantee a steady check-in until we’re well away. It’s not dead, but it’s not clean.”

Liv looked at her. Sophie’s voice always held a small measure of apology even for weather. “Understood,” Liv said. “We go anyway.”

“Right.” She glanced down at the tablet, her thumb fixed on the edge. She reread a line, then tucked it closer.

Rhea edged the first pair of canisters onto the gangway with careful, rule-bound moves. The white of her knuckles showed through her glove. Her glasses had a new repair at one hinge, clear tape neat and precise. “Low and midships,” she called. “No knocks, no twisting. If something slides, the whole set swings. I want four-point lash on each and nothing sharing their tie-downs. I need a plug for the heater as close as we can get without cooking the insulation.”

“I’ll give you the space where the epoxy would have gone,” Liv said before the thought could feel raw. “You ride with them till we clear the headland.”

“Kai, take the cores. Four-point each. You sign off on them before the heater runs.”

Rhea gave a curt nod. She glanced at the taped case on the dock and swallowed whatever thought would have opened a new conversation. Her hand stayed on the canister. The little screen held steady a shade above the line she had drawn on a laminated card with a black marker.

Ilya didn’t move. He looked at Liv, then at the kit, then at the inlet mouth. He had stood in engine rooms during storms with a wrench in his teeth and one shoulder against a failing fitting. He had done the rough

work the words on her grant applications didn't cover. Liv did not hold out a promise to him now. She gave him motion.

"Get the lines on the bow clear," she said. "We leave in five."

He picked up the epoxy case. For a second she thought he would swing it aboard, and her muscles readied against the small fight that would follow. He set it deeper on the dock instead, just out of reach of a careless foot. His knuckles rapped once on the rail. He looked from the kit to the inlet and then moved forward to the bow.

Kai had a crate at his hip and his knee braced against the coaming. "If I ask again, will it change?"

"No."

"Okay," he said, and the word had no softness to it. He shouldered past the question and took the lane of work she had given. He would make order. He would not pretend to like it.

Sophie's breath showed, a thin plume that went in one direction without a flutter. She nestled the tablet under her jacket. "I'll log a departure note while I still have a bar."

"Do it," Liv said.

She went to the stern and put a hand on the top of the wheel. It was cold and rough with salt that had dried and crusted since the last scrub. She looked at the way the surge pushed into the pilings and drew back. The interval had shortened. Not much, but enough that her skin recognized it. She counted it without words, then let her hand drop.

"Stores forward," she said to Kai. "Everything heavy goes under. Don't bury the spares we'll need before dawn."

"On it." He ducked forward and took the edge off a collision of crates, slid them along the deck with his foot so he did not turn his back to the water.

Rhea called down through the companionway as she maneuvered the canisters. “Watch the lip. It catches.”

“I’ve got the lip,” Kai said, and set his knee under the weight so his hands would be free to guide.

The inlet carried a smell of old fish and clean snow. The mountain slopes beyond the town wore their first coat of the season. Down the dock, a man with a cigarette watched them over a stack of traps. He did not wave. The mooring lines ran taut to the cleats.

Liv walked the starboard side, palm brushing the stanchions, checking for a loose fastener. The faces around her shifted with the friction of hurry. Once the arguing stopped, the work went quicker. She did not smile. She did not spend friendliness to cover strain that would return later. She saved it for after the pull, if there was an after.

Sophie reappeared. “Window keeps stepping in,” she said. “Their wording on the forecast is unkind.”

“Then we don’t dawdle,” Liv said. She looked at the sky, cast to a hard grey that took color out of everything. Then she looked at the water and the half-centimeter difference in the way it stood against the hull line compared to an hour before they started moving weight forward. Subtle and consequential. The bow would ride a little deeper. The stern would let go a little earlier. The wheel would have a different feel. She would listen.

“Lines ready?” she called.

“Ready forward,” Ilya said from the bow.

“Ready aft,” Kai answered.

Rhea said, “Core one and two secure. Working on three and four. Sophie, I need the heater soon.”

Sophie raised a hand. “As soon as we’re clear. I don’t want to run it on the dock power with this cable.”

The wind slackened for a breath. The flags along the harbor edge drooped, not fully, just enough to show weight instead of fight. The chop leveled between posts. It was not luck. It was a window. Liv took it.

“Cast off forward,” she said.

The bow line fell clean.

“Cast off aft.”

Kai pulled the loop, threw the working end aboard with neat hands, and stepped across without hitch. The deck under Liv’s boots vibrated differently as the weight shifted and the hull eased away. She felt for the initial feedback through the wheel and set her hand.

Sophie, on the stern quarter, said, “Clear.”

“Clear,” Liv repeated. She stood with her shoulders square and her feet planted in a way that told anyone watching she would not be moved by a word. She nudged the throttle. Diesel caught and smoothed. The boat took the lane between pilings on a line that left little room for second guesses.

She did not look back at the epoxy kit. She did not need to see it to know exactly where it sat, how the tape curled at one corner and how whatever layer of dust had formed on it over years of trips would be disturbed by the wind now and then, leaving a clean oval where a hand would go by habit. She kept her eyes on the channel markers and the play of tide at the mouth. Whatever was left behind could not be fetched back without a call to pride and time they did not have.

They rounded the last marker. The inlet widened and the little side movements of water folded into a longer reach. Calyptra found steady motion. Liv took a small correction to starboard and held it. The wind came on again, unchanged, but a pocket had opened and they were in it. She breathed once, not to ease anything, just to calibrate. One line only: buy hours while the sea allowed. She counted one-two-three.

The galley kettle wavered on a low flame as the boat lifted and set. In the cabin the table had a ring of old scratches where mugs had shifted with unplanned force over the years. The air had more bodies than space. Jackets hung from hooks, clean to the eye and salty to the touch. Condensation beaded and fell from the inner lip of the cabin hatch at long intervals.

Liv stood at the head of the little table, the only place in the cabin that felt like an end rather than a side. “We’re on the outer track,” she said. “We move quick while the water lets us. Watches are three hours, then two as we get into the night.” She looked to Sophie first. “You and Kai take the first deck watch together. Ilya, you’re below on systems. Rhea, you stay with the cores, you call out any temperature drift you don’t like.”

Kai rolled his shoulder under a fleece and nodded. “Copy.”

Sophie’s mouth was a small tight line, the kind some people read as a smile when they want comfort. “Copy.”

Ilya’s cap sat on the bench beside him, one corner of it wet from some careless touch. He had his palms flat on the table, fingers spread, not pushing, not retreating. “We throw away the epoxy,” he said. The kettle began a thin note. “So what is our contingency if we take a strike below? Not in the hull fantasy. In the hull we are standing in.”

“We run pumps, wedge what we can, close it, and we do not take that strike.”

Ilya looked at her for a count. She met it. The kettle added a second thread to the first.

“Inside route is calmer,” Sophie said in the space after. “It buys less exposure if the forecast is lying to us. It adds time, but it may reduce the punch we take if the sea stands up.”

Liv shook her head. “We lose the window. The train of weather doesn’t stop. The donor review dates don’t stop. We are not out here with a cushion.”

Sophie lifted her tablet. The screen showed a cached email with a header from the foundation. She scrolled with her thumb until she reached a line and read, “‘Internal review scheduled next Thursday prior to public release calendar updates.’ That’s not a delivery mandate.”

Liv kept her tone smooth. “Thank you for flagging it. We’ll align their calendar to ours.”

Ilya reached under the bench, tapped the lid of the empty locker where the kit would have sat, then set his palm back on the table and returned to stillness.

Rhea shifted, careful not to jostle her leg against the table. “Temperature margin is tight enough that I would like the heater now,” she said. “I understand the power draw. I understand the risk. The cores don’t care about any of that. They care about what we do.”

“You’ll get the heater,” Liv said. “It goes in the space where the epoxy would have lived. Cable runs behind the bench and up, not across the floor. No one trips on it. Kai, you set it up after we clear the headland.”

Kai nodded. “Done.”

Sophie watched Liv, then looked at Ilya again, then back to Liv. “We are not a trawler with a spare crew,” she said. “If something goes wrong on the outer route, we own all of it at once.”

“We own all of it at once on any route,” Liv said. She softened the last word without changing the meaning. “We run it this way now. Log any objections at port.”

Kai scratched a small patch on his knuckle and didn’t look up. “Who calls triage if we get hurt?” he asked. “Me on the deck? Ilya below? Or you?”

“I do,” Liv said. The kettle’s thin sound made a fresh reach into the space between words. “You will shout what you see. Ilya will tell me what the boat can give. I will call it.”

Sophie’s thumb hovered over the screen. Her mouth tightened, then she lowered the tablet a fraction.

Ilya didn’t look away. She let that stand as a shape in the room.

Sophie exhaled through her nose. “Donor pressure is not physics.”

“It translates into physics when we lose next year’s funding and move our gear into storage,” Liv said. “The window we have is the one we have. We move now or we accept we’ve chosen a different mission outcome before we’ve left the inlet.”

The kettle found its high note and held it.

“I’ll pour,” Rhea said, pushing up to standing with a grunt and a hand on the bench to take some of the leg’s work. She turned the knob and shifted the kettle off the flame. The whistle cut. Heat washed over their faces and set steam curling up past the little porthole glass.

Liv did not say sorry. She put the cups on the table herself and aligned the handles out of habit, all facing the same way. She spoke as she worked. “Sophie and Kai on deck until midnight. Then I’ll take Kai for the shorter watch. Ilya, you stay with me on systems. Rhea, you do not leave the cores. If you need the head, you call Sophie to escort you. No one moves alone forward in the dark without telling someone. That is not pride. That is a rule.”

Kai took a cup and nodded once. Sophie’s hand shook a little as she lifted hers and steadied on the second try. Rhea wrapped both palms around the heat and closed her eyes, steadying herself. Ilya left his cup where it had been set.

“Any other immediate objections?” Liv asked. She kept the tone even and left no small door open where a new argument could start.

Sophie looked back at the tablet. “No,” she said. Then, softer: “Not now.”

“Then that’s it,” Liv said. “Get ready. We’re clear of the headland in ten.”

The kettle cooled in small clicks. Liv climbed the ladder and took the helm; the wheel’s rubber was cold. She set the outer track on the plotter and matched the bow to it. The motion on the swell had already stretched into longer periods. No one spoke for a few seconds.

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The wheel carried a small shiver with the new trim. Liv set her feet wide and let the deck tell her what it needed. The bow cut into sharper water. Spray traced a sheet across the foredeck and smacked the dodger in a pattern that set time for her hands. The point behind them narrowed and slid under the fog that had started to come in low from the left.

Sophie stuck her head up, scarf zipped snug, hat tucked hard over her ears. She peered ahead with one hand on the cabin top. “Traffic is thin,” she said. “I don’t have much on the list. Nothing nearby. We’re largely alone.”

“Good,” Liv said. A space opened for that word and closed. Alone meant clear water to run without guessing another boat’s intentions. Alone meant fewer hands to call if they needed them. She filed both truths side by side.

Kai moved along the starboard deck on bent knees, his weight low as he checked the lashings by feel. He leaned into the forward hatch, tapped a crate with his knuckles, frowned at the small jump it gave. He pulled two loops of webbing tighter, braced his foot on the cleat, and fed slack through the buckle with a practiced snap. The crate stopped moving. He ran his finger along the edge to be sure.

“Loose forward crate fixed,” he called back. “Would’ve bitten someone’s shin later.”

“Thank you,” Liv said. She did not add the please. It was not the right place for it.

Fog cut range to what they could touch and trust. Features arrived late. Liv adjusted the course two degrees by feel and kept the bow aimed at the little bite in the coastline that marked the outer route. The compass card held steady in a slow, precise roll. She listened to the shift in the sound from the hull, a new hum in the lower boards that came when the bow held more and the stern let go a fraction sooner. It was not a problem. It was a change. She named it as change and set her stance to that.

Ilya came up into the companionway just enough to put his face in the colder air. He leaned an elbow on the lip and watched the spray pattern for a while. Then he ducked back down. She heard him below, rapping knuckles on a panel, the note a little duller than it had been tied up at the dock. He knew what he was hearing. So did she. He did not say a word above the deck noise.

Rhea sat on the cabin sole with her back against the bench near the cores. She had the thermometer display in her lap, the cord neat. She watched the numbers without blinking. The heater pushed warm air into the corner, and the faint rubber smell of its hose rode the cabin air. She closed her eyes for a few seconds and breathed in through her nose, out through her mouth, a controlled pattern that kept her hands steady. The boat moved around her, and she let herself move with it so the cores would not.

Sophie slid onto the seat beside the companionway, headset looped over one ear even if it wasn’t giving her much. Her fingers worked a notepad in her lap, writing down times and readings you could get by counting as well as by listening to the machine. She drew a small map of where they were and where they should be and marked the numbers

along it. Every few minutes she stood, put her head up, and scanned the fog with the sort of attention people reserve for children who have gotten quiet in another room.

Liv kept her hands on the wheel in a way that looked relaxed from a few feet away and was not. Her shoulders were low. Her chest felt tight and clean. Numbers kept her steady. One line only: buy hours while the sea allowed. She counted in threes with each lift and kept her grip even.

The color ahead darkened; the light went early for this latitude. The fog bank thickened. Range fell to a few boat lengths. They entered it.

“Visibility halving,” Sophie said without looking away from the window.

“Lights are on,” Liv said. “Sound the horn on the hour even if the list stays quiet.”

Sophie nodded and set her timer.

Two boat lengths of visibility, a tenth off speed; she noted the cost and kept their line.

Kai came back to the cockpit and crouched near the companionway. The wet on his jacket had started to soak through at the shoulders. “Forward looks good,” he said. “No free swingers. I put an extra strap on the port locker. The latch is tired.”

“Good eye,” Liv said. She felt the wheel’s pull change under a set of waves that came in with a fresher edge. She took power back by a fractional touch, not enough to pull them off their line, enough to keep the bow from punching and losing speed on the up. The helm steadied under her hands.

Kai dropped below, threaded the heater cable through the empty locker where the epoxy would have lived, and cinched the unit into that space. His glance caught on the swap once, then he moved on.

Rhea spoke from below. “Heater holding. We’re at target. If power droops I’ll call.”

“Noted,” Liv said. “Sophie, keep a tally of draw every fifteen.”

“I’ve got it.” Sophie made another note, numbers and check marks. She had started to hum under her breath without knowing it. It wasn’t a tune. It was steady sound that made the counting easier.

No one spoke about the epoxy kit. The heater sat where the case would have lived.

The headland thinned to a grey blur off the quarter. Turning back stayed available. She kept them on the line she had chosen. Turning would not be safety; it would spend the window for nothing they could use.

The sea lifted the bow and set it down, each cycle needing the same attention. Liv gave it. Behind her, mugs on the galley shelf all faced the same direction. The kettle sat empty, cool metal against the hob. The heater pushed for the cores. Sophie made marks. Kai rolled his shoulders. Ilya touched the lower panel and the hum spoke to him. Rhea watched the numbers. Fog slid on the windows.

Liv let her shoulders drop half an inch and tightened her hands by the same measure. She had made a trade and now she would carry it. The ledger took the next line without softening the numbers.

Calyptra’s bow pushed on into the darker water. The dock was gone behind them. The case on the concrete was not part of the boat anymore. The route ahead did not offer comfort. It offered the chance to be first, to be through, to be where they said they would be before the door shut and locked on their wake. She held what she held and kept the boat true. A low tremor in the wheel persisted. She shifted her hands, felt it hold, and left it unspoken.

# Chapter 2

## Strike

Midnight watch was on. Fog cut the world to the bow light's cone; beyond it, only gray that gave up shape when the beam struck. Liv stood with her hands set at the same points on the wheel, skin wrinkled from salt and cold. The tremor in the rim had a steady pulse now. She counted in threes to smooth her thinking and left the numbers in her mouth without sound.

Kai moved forward and back on bent knees, keeping under the dodger until he had to lift his head. He checked the foredeck straps again by habit and by need. The boat carried the new balance from the weight they had moved before dark, bow a shade heavier, stern releasing early when a deeper set rose under them. He placed a palm on a cleat and felt the deck flex and settle with each longer swell. He looked back at her and nodded once. The nod told her the foredeck was secure.

The horn had sounded at the top of the hour and faded into the fog. Sophie had been asleep in her bunk for forty minutes by Liv's count. Rhea lay on the cabin sole near the cores with her knees pulled toward her chest to conserve heat in the cramped space, eyes closed but not asleep. Ilya was below with the panels, unwilling to ignore a new noise.

A film tracked across the compass glass. Liv wiped it with two fingers and kept still. Conditions changed on their own time. She had people and tasks, nothing else.

A darker block showed inside the gray. Kai had his hand up before the word came. "There," he said, voice flat. He pointed off the bow a fraction to port. "Something. Big."

Liv did not ask the what. She threw her weight into the wheel and brought the nose right. Engine note rose under her hand, the rubber of the throttle cold at her palm. The boat answered, slow in the heavy water. The shape grew into hard edges and a horizontal line too straight for nature. The bow light touched a scuffed corner and then a rusted hook barely above the surface.

“Container,” Kai said. He hardly raised his voice. “Port bow.”

Liv held the wheel over as far as the rudder would bite. She wished the stern lighter so it would swing faster. The water under them built into a shallow rise. She knew it a breath before the sound arrived.

The impact erased the usual creaks and left one wrenching metal sound through the floorboards. The bow rode up and then dropped. The stern rolled left and held. The wheel kicked and dragged her wrist. A blunt crash came from the cabin with weight behind it. In the galley, an enamel mug slid and tapped the stove once. She caught the companionway rim with her forearm as she leaned down toward the hatch.

She heard the relocated dry-stores crate before she saw it. The strap had been old and she should have cut it and fed in a new one when they moved the dry stores from under the table. She had told herself it would hold because numbers were against her and there had been other lines to pull. The strap slipped under the force and the crate broke free, slid across the tilted sole, and drove low through the cabin. It hit the table leg and turned into Rhea’s shins. Rhea’s body went over in a curl that held nothing. Her scream hit the cabin hard.

Below, a man’s grunt and a bang from the bulkhead landed in the same beat. Ilya’s voice came back a second later, no words, just a sound of air forced out by a blow. Then he cursed under his breath. The sound was thin and ragged.

Water forced up through the seams and the bilge access. Cold soaked through her boots into bone. The deck lifted again under a slower swell

and the new list held past where it should have corrected.

“Pump on. Now,” Liv said. Her voice held steady because there was time for one of them to keep it that way and she would not spend anyone else for that. “Kai, bilge. Sophie, ”

Sophie was already half out of her bunk, hair everywhere, headset in one hand and one sock peeled halfway off. Grabbing the post by the companionway, she shoved the headset to her ear. “May, ” Static chewed her word. “Pan, ” Nothing but grit and a high, thin whine. “I can’t get, ” She pulled the headset off and stared at it. The hand mic gave the same white noise in her chest and face.

“Call anyway,” Liv said. “Then bucket.” She could not give them much to hold, only tasks.

Rhea had made a sound that did not have language in it and then shut her teeth on the next one. Trying to push herself away from the cores, she fell again, hands sliding in spilled sugar and rice from the broken crate. She panted and tried to find the right place for her leg and could not find any place at all.

“Kai,” Liv said, “get her clear.”

He slid through the companionway, feet out from under him and then up, shoulders taking a wall to steady the fall. He reached for Rhea by the waist, low and careful, and dragged her to the lee bench. She clawed for something to hold as the boat shifted under them and gripped the coaming, the cockpit rim, with both hands, eyes shut, lips pulled back to show teeth she would not use.

“Don’t move your leg,” he said. It was useless instruction and also the only thing that could be said to her that didn’t lie about the next hour.

Ilya made it halfway up onto his knees and pressed his hand to his side where the body is supposed to be hard and found the wrong kind of softness. He kept his mouth set. “Pump,” he said, voice rough. “Close, ” The word clipped away. He took a breath through his nose. “Close the aft

hatch inside. Keep it boxy. Keep it out of the saloon.”

Liv’s hands had never left the wheel. Throttle off, she let the boat lose way. Better to drift than to feed the water more speed to hit. She cut the engine. In the quiet, water noise stood out.

“Stations,” she said. “Now. Sophie, please, buckets, then the first aid kit. Kai, you’re on pump intake. Clear the strainer every minute. Rhea, ” She broke the habit of telling people what would help them feel held. “Rhea, keep your hands off that leg.”

The pump started. The hose shook against its mounts, and a hard stream discharged into the cockpit scupper drain. It wouldn’t keep up.

The boat leaned again, more to port, and this time it did not come back as far. Liv set her feet wider and kept them there. The wheel had a new slack that did not belong. She mapped the likely path of damage through structure.

She looked for Sophie and found her at the locker with both hands in a mess of cleaning cloths and zippered pouches that felt too light. Sophie threw a bucket to Kai and shoved another at the foot of the ladder for whoever needed it next. She hit transmit again, speaking into the air. Nothing came through. She set the mic down with care. “No joy,” she said.

“Do it again,” Liv said. “Then bail.”

Kai cleared the strainer with two hard dips of his hand, flicked the hair and grit off with a worker’s motion, and put it back before the pump could lose prime. He timed it to the outlet stream and the set of the boat. He did not look up. He did not ask about the crate or the break or the consequence of both. He kept to the next job and then the one after that.

Liv let the breath go behind her teeth and did not let it become a sigh. She took stock. Two emergencies and one hole. She sat the helm back to zero and ratcheted her own choices down to one line. Water first.

The crate lay at the angle it had earned, its corner cracked and a corner lid screw torn out. Rice poured into the bilge access and made a paste at the seam where water met what had been dinner in two nights. The smell of rice and sugar mixed with diesel. Rhea's trouser leg had torn at the shin. The skin beneath had a clean, wrong color.

Kai took her under the arms and slid her back up the bench. He kept her leg supported with his forearm without making a show of it. He knew where not to touch by the way she held herself frozen in space. "You're clear," he said. "Stay there."

Rhea blinked fast and focused her attention on the cores as if she could will them to sit tighter by watching. "They're," The word cut with a little breath. "They're secure." Her eyes went to the heater vent, making sure of that warmth like it was a person she could count on to show up to a plan.

Sophie came with the kit and tore it open. The contents made a small sound against plastic, too little and too neat. With bandage rolls and a hard splint they'd used once in training on a volunteer who had giggled under too much attention, she cut Rhea's trouser leg with a short, steady hand and found the bone angled wrong, the skin broken and wet. Rhea swallowed and turned her face away only at that point.

"Okay," Sophie said. "I need you to breathe for me. Stay with me." She looked through the kit. "Liv, do we have anything stronger than the ibuprofen?" She did not say the other words. Anaesthetic. Morphine. Nothing she could say would build those into the kit.

"Not on this boat," Liv said. She kept her voice low, edges straight. "Wrap what you can. Keep it still. I'll get you a board." Her mouth had formed the Sorry out of habit. She stopped it behind her teeth and let it go where all the other apologies had gone when she took the first job that put money and bodies on the line.

Ilya tried for his feet again and did not make it. He settled on a knee and then slid to sit with his back to the bulkhead. His hand found his side. His fingers found that same wrong give. His face had emptied of color in a way that did not feel like seasickness. He was a big man and he looked smaller than the space he occupied.

“Isolate it,” he said, the words barely there, pulled through grit. “Shut the port-side cabin hatch. Keep the saloon dry. Shift weight starboard. Keep the stern from dropping. Kill the engine,” He looked toward Liv and saw it was already done. He gave a small nod.

Sophie braced against the list and swung the port-side cabin hatch shut. The hinge squealed. She dropped the latch and tested it with a tug. “Shut.” The waterline at the sill steadied.

Kai had the bucket line going now, bailing between clearing the strainer and shifting a sack of onions that wanted to migrate into the bilge. He worked square to the floor, using his legs where he could, conserving where he couldn’t. He passed a bucket up to the cockpit, where Sophie, on one foot and one knee for stability, dumped it over the side and shot back down with the emptiness held out for him to fill again. The outlet stream kept its hard run. The level still climbed by a finger’s width and then another.

Liv dropped to a crouch in the cabin, reached under the settee, and hauled out two planks from the storage they kept for winter baffles. They were meant to keep cold out in Norwegian harbors, not water out in the North Atlantic, but they had length and strength and she could wedge them into something under pressure. She set them by the hatch and looked at the access.

“Open it,” she said. “Show me.”

Kai popped the nearest board and they both saw the water as a thing with speed. It crashed against the edges and shoved itself upward. Flotsam already tumbled in the dark, a little screw, a sliver of wood, a strip of nothing from a forgotten bag. The pump pulled and discharged,

steady and small.

“Strainer,” Liv said.

“On it.” He reached and grabbed and reset and went back to bailing with a motion built from habit and will.

Sophie’s face shone with sweat under her hat. She had Rhea’s leg wrapped to immobilize the fracture. She slid a board behind the calf and tied it above and below the break with the kind of knots she used on deck, one hand firm and the other calm. Rhea hissed once and then held her breath long enough to make the edges of her eyes pinch. Sophie pressed Rhea’s shoulder, light. “That’s the worst of it,” she said. She said it anyway.

Rhea’s face went grey and then flushed. “Cores are in band,” she said. Her voice tried for normal and didn’t find it. “They’re still in band. Heater’s steady.” Her mouth trembled and she bit it still. “Don’t move the heater.”

“We won’t,” Liv said. She would negotiate with that later when she had to. She picked a plank up and ran her hand along its edge. She did not have epoxy. She had wood and force and the ability to wedge a thing where it would not go on its own.

The list steepened another notch, the port side dipping until the right-hand edge of the table felt higher than her chest. Every move cost twice what it had the hour before. The pump ran steady. The level still rose.

Liv caught herself about to say it would be okay and swallowed it. “We are holding,” she said instead. “Keep the water moving.”

Ilya watched the corner where water and wall met and tracked the rise with his eyes. He breathed through his nose and held his ribs in a clamp that hurt to see.

“Speak if you’re going to pass out,” Kai said to him without looking. It was an order disguised as concern.

“Don’t be cute,” Ilya said. The words were paper-thin. He found his voice’s old cadence. Sweat pulled at his hairline.

“Not trying to be,” Kai said. He cleared the strainer again. “I need to know if you’re going to stop talking.”

“I’ll warn you,” Ilya said, and the effort of shaping syllables pulled sweat at his hairline. He closed his eyes and opened them again.

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The bulkhead clock ticked once.

Liv moved to the locker where she had told Rhea to put the heater. She opened the door and reached in without thinking for the box that was not there. Her hand touched the heater’s warm casing and paused; the hose left a rubber smell. The empty space where the epoxy kit would have been was plain. She closed the locker quietly and kept her face flat. She had made that trade an hour behind them.

Sophie kept to the clock on the bulkhead, sent her voice into the fog, got scratch bursts and a long gap. She went back to the window, scanning gray for darker gray that would mean metal or hull.

Rhea’s hands had gone cold and damp in Sophie’s grip. Sophie tucked a blanket under her shoulders without moving her leg and set a folded jacket under the splint so her calf would not bear all the pressure on one point. “You with me?” Sophie asked.

Rhea nodded once and looked down at the thermometer port again, that little circle giving her numbers that belonged to a rational world. “They’re still in the band,” she said. “They will stay in the band.” She said it again three minutes later without noticing she had repeated herself.

Kai looked under the settee for towels he could stuff into a crack that he knew would not be in the right place. He found a bag of old rags and wrenched the ties apart with his teeth when his fingers didn’t want to

work in the cold. He shoved cloth into a seam along the baseboard where the water flowed toward the open space and slowed the ingress a little. He shifted a crate of canned tomatoes higher and wedged it with his boot and a plank so it would not join the bilge.

“Ilya,” Liv said, crouching near him without taking her eyes off the waterline. “Talk me through your isolates.”

He nodded once. The small move looked like it hurt. “Shut the port locker forward. Stuff it, wedge it. Don’t let the spray line carry.” He took a breath and made himself spend it wisely. “Kill the port-side electricals below the waterline. Leave the pump feed alone. Move the spare battery up a tier. If she loses prime, prime her by hand and swear. She likes that.” He closed his eyes for a slowing count and opened them again. “Bring the heavy box forward starboard. The one with the chain. You need that mass high and right.”

Kai was already up. Orders sharpened his motion; he went straight to the chain box. He grunted when it shifted and took half his strength. Sophie slid in and added her shoulder. They made an ugly little sound between them and got the box against the starboard bench. The boat made a small correction that did not last long.

Liv pulled a gasketed panel off the port locker and stuffed rags into the gap. Her fingers went numb and then regained feeling in a rush that hurt. She pressed until the fabric swelled and the water threaded around it instead of through. It was not a fix. It was a pause.

Fog thickened outside the windows. The world had the size of the cabin and the part of the deck she could touch with her foot if she reached. Liv ran through what she had and what she did not. She could not change the materials on the boat with words. She could choose where they lived on it.

Ilya watched her face. She did not invite comment.

“Don’t,” she said without looking at him.

The corners of his eyes creased, then flattened with a wince. He turned his head toward the ceiling. “No donor ever asked me for speed.” The words barely reached her over the pump and the bucket and the water. He let the words sit. Her hands paused, then kept working.

Liv worked the plank into the seam where floor met the inner hull and found a place where force would give them something. She set the board and knelt on it and added another wedge, hands steady, breath even. The motion pushed water back a finger’s width at the gap. They gained a thin margin for a few minutes.

“Hold,” she said. She let the order be what it was. “We’re not going under now. We hold till light.”

Sophie checked the window. No light. She nodded, swallowed, and went back to her rhythm: radio, bucket, wrap, scan. “Top of the hour,” she said. “Do you want the horn?”

“Give it a short,” Liv said. “One.” The sound rolled out and hit the fog and came back in pieces. No reply came from any direction. Sophie’s mouth tightened for a breath and then she put the mic back, grabbed the bucket, and came down again.

The pump stayed steady. The hose thumped. Water collected in the corners and ran toward the low point. Every action had to be deliberate; there was no extra to spend on missteps.

Rhea’s voice floated up, smaller now. “Heater’s holding.” She had her hand near the vent, fingers splayed to feel warmth on the skin of her wrist. “Don’t take it. Please.”

“We won’t,” Liv said again.

Kai came back wet to mid-shin and breathing hard without any sound to it. He took the bucket from Sophie and sent it up. “Level’s not running away with us,” he said. “She’s still coming in.”

“Understood,” Liv said. “Keep her awake.” She looked at Ilya on the floor and hated the color of his mouth. “And you, if you can’t talk, hit the

panel twice.”

Ilya’s gaze eased at that; he nodded once and then focused on the corner again. His right hand had begun to shake. He set it flat on the floor and kept it there.

Politeness returned because it worked. “Please,” Sophie said, not to anyone in particular, just to the air that carried the next bucket. “Thank you,” Kai said as he took weight from her shoulder for the box. “Sorry,” Rhea whispered to no one. “For the,” She glanced at the mess of rice and sugar and stopped, embarrassed by the apology as if the crate had been her mess to fix.

“Don’t,” Liv said, and it covered all of it at once. She sounded more like a commander than a caretaker and felt the difference in her chest.

She put a hand flat on the cabin table to steady her knees as the boat took a longer set and held the list. The angle grew harder, not by degrees she could measure on a protractor but by how the muscle in her thigh burned by the half hour. She tallied without stopping work: pump minutes, bucket minutes, battery minutes. Water versus rations. Heat versus draw. Bodies versus jobs.

“Plan,” Sophie said between breaths, because she needed to bite down on words instead of panic. “We hold for light. You said it.”

Liv nodded once. She had reasoned through that much. “We’re not doing anything exterior in the dark,” she said. “No one goes overboard. No one goes under the floor beyond sight. We hold as we are. We hold for hours.”

Kai gave a single short answer. “Copy.” He didn’t push for anything harder. He saved his strength for the next lift.

Sophie looked at Rhea’s face and then at Liv. “We need to keep her warm. She’s dropping.”

“Take my jacket,” Liv said. “Rhea, you tell me if you lose feeling in your toes.”

“I won’t,” Rhea said and then amended it, honest through pain. “I’ll try.”

Liv moved to the heater again and watched the little red indicator that meant the element was doing what it promised. She clocked the draw without solving it now.

Time moved slow. Fog remained thick. Its cycle stayed even. A long time passed where no one said more than five words at a stretch and all the words were functional. The level in the bilge reached the lip of the access and stayed there, a thin skin over the board edges.

At one point, Sophie laughed once, a sharp out-breath with no humor in it that startled her and everyone else. She covered it with a cough and dragged the next bucket. “I’m fine,” she said to the floor.

“We know,” Liv said. She meant it. “Keep going.”

Ilya knocked twice on the panel with his knuckles, not because he couldn’t speak yet but to mark that he remembered the agreement. Then he closed his eyes and did not open them for a long minute. Liv timed the pump’s cycle against the rise of his chest until both encouraged her to leave them alone.

She looked toward the companionway. On the chartplotter, the trace kept looping over itself. There was no ship in their world and no one to tell them what to do. Good. She did not want anyone else’s noise in her decisions right now. Bad. She wanted a hand to pull them if one existed.

She pictured morning. It would not change the hole. It would let them see it. There was something to be said for seeing the edges. A clean line you could plan against. She was ready to pay for that with this night, with every pump minute and every breath they had to use up to get there.

“Liv.” Sophie’s voice came in quiet. “We’re steady at the lip.”

Liv let her shoulders drop a fraction and tightened her grip on the table by the same amount. “Hold here,” she said. “Dawn’s a few hours. We’ll look at it then.” She looked at Kai. “Switch with me in ten minutes

on the bucket. I want eyes on the forward join for a minute.”

“Copy.” He didn’t argue. He moved in a way that promised he would not forget it.

Rhea had drifted into a corner of sleep that did not rest. She kept waking when her body remembered pain and her mouth moved with the same words each time. “In band,” she whispered. “Still in band.” Sophie’s hand sat on her shoulder like a weight keeping her in the shape of herself.

Ilya opened his eyes again and met Liv’s for half a second. He didn’t nod this time. It would have cost him. He looked past her at the ceiling, took two measured breaths, and set his mouth in a line that said he would sit through whatever this night asked because that was the job.

The pump ran. The water still climbed slowly. The boat held its crooked angle and the crew learned how to live in it. Morning would not shrink the hole. It would only show its edges.

# Chapter 3

## Ledger

The pump kept its hard note and the hose trembled against the scupper drain. The cabin air had the taste of wet metal. The windows showed only white. The bulkhead clock ticked, faint under the thrum. Liv crouched by the open bilge and set her palm flat to the inner seam where floor met hull. Cold pushed through the skin and into the small bones of her hand. When the swell lifted under them the torn edge pressed in. The pressure built and then went slack when the boat fell away. On the next lift it pressed again. She slid her hand along the edge and felt a frayed place where the board had chewed itself. Her knuckles scraped and came back with a thin red line that washed clean at once.

"Don't go past sight," she said. It came out steady. The rule she had set an hour ago still held. She kept her shoulders close to the table leg so the boat's next lean would not take her further than she wanted.

Sophie's pencil tapped the bulkhead once, then stopped. "Top of the hour in eight minutes," she said. Her voice aimed small. The hand mic hung on its hook and the headset lay aside while she worked down the dial one notch at a time. Carrier. Crackle. The same high whine that meant circuitry and not a person. She wrote the time and the result next to it. Empty lines filled a page. A small circle around the last mark sat crossed through, a private control.

Liv edged her palm further. The torn board had an inward lip. Each wave pressed the edge into the boat's body and let it spring back a fraction. The gap took water fast, then slower when the pump output matched part of it. Not enough. She pinched on the rise to test the movement. Pain flared through the slice. She lifted her hand away a

breath and put it back. She could not fix what she could not see yet, but she could learn where it wanted to move.

Rhea's mouth had a new dry line to it. Sophie had tucked two blankets under her shoulders and rigged a jacket under the splint so the wood would not bite into one point on the calf. Rhea's forearm lay across her stomach. The skin at her wrist ran hot. Her hair stuck to her forehead in small strings. A sheen sat on her upper lip and did not go. When she blinked, she held her eyes shut a fraction too long.

"You're warm," Sophie said, touching Rhea's wrist with two fingers. She did it the way a person sets a pot back on a burner they already know is hot: careful, not slow. "I'm going to give you two more tabs. Small sip. That's all."

"We're cutting water," Liv said without raising her head. The sentence had weight. She felt the room shift around it before anyone replied. "She can have a mouthful. That's not the thing that sinks us."

Sophie nodded once and reached into the kit. She shook two ibuprofen into her palm and glanced at Liv. Liv held her stillness and kept her face plain. Sophie opened a bottle and measured a mouthful into the cap. Rhea grimaced at the tilt and took it in, mouth tight as if she could keep it from touching anything. She swallowed and breathed in small shallow pulls. "Sorry," she said, though the word had no clear object.

"Don't," Liv said. It covered pain, fever, and the state of the floor.

Kai worked the pump strainer and dumped grit into a tray they had found under the sink. He set the strainer back before the pump lost prime, then pushed the bucket up the ladder. Sophie had the knee-down, one-foot brace at the companionway and dumped the load before the water sloshed back into the cabin. Her arms shook more now when she returned the empty bucket. She rubbed the heel of her hand under her eye and missed, then left it.

"Level's still kissing the lip," Kai said. He didn't look at the measure. He didn't need to. The sound told him as much as sight did by this point.

He bent for the next dip.

Liv pulled her hand free and shook out the sting in her fingers. She put the skin between forefinger and thumb in her mouth for a second and tasted metal and salt and the plastic of the rag she had shoved into the gap earlier. The rag still held in place, swelling and threading water around it. "Ilya," she said, turning her head. "Materials."

He had his shoulders braced against the bulkhead and one knee up, an arm clamped across his ribs. His lips had lost their color, and there was a grey-yellow under the stubble that didn't belong. He nodded once, a small move. "Bed rails. Slats. Table leaf. Ladder rung. Anything that can take a crush without splitting. Cloth to back it. Webbing if you can spare it. A brace to set the pack. You'll want one long and one short for the angle."

Liv counted one-two-three under her breath. She had done it since she was twenty, since the day when someone's hand had not been where it needed to be because she had waited for consensus. She stood. Her knees shot pain up into her thighs and then settled. "We're taking the bunks apart," she said. "Now. We're not sleeping tonight. Maybe not tomorrow. They can go for a wedge."

Sophie's head turned before her mouth moved. She looked at the two narrow berths they had wedged themselves into on calmer nights and then back at Liv. She nodded once, mouth a hard line.

Kai didn't ask if there was another set of boards. He had already seen the table and the ladder. He looked at the bunks and then at Rhea. "How long can we keep this pace on full rations?" he asked. He kept his tone even. It still felt hard in the small space.

"We're not on full," Liv said before anyone else could answer for her. "We're cutting food and water by half." She didn't wait for questions. "Two hundred and fifty millilitres per person per six hours. No cooking. Cold tins. Sugar and rice are gone to the bilge. We have crackers and cans. We'll share a cup of something when we can justify flame. Not now."

Sophie's mouth closed and stayed closed. Whatever line she had had between steady and not-steady disappeared. She wrote something on the side of her log and put her pencil down under the metal lip so it would not roll. She didn't meet Liv's eye. She didn't look away either. She fixed on the scupper instead and let one slow breath out through her nose.

"You'll say it," Kai said without heat. He had set his shoulders square. "Go on."

Liv put her hands flat on the table. Her palm left a small wet print. "Litres. Calories. Minutes," she said. "It's a ledger. We spend from all three and we match them or we don't. We're starting debt on water because we can't make more right now. We're starting debt on calories because we don't have time to cook. We're starting debt on minutes because dawn is not here and we're already at the lip. We'll keep the pump fed and we'll keep bodies upright and we'll make a wedge. That's the work."

Two pump cycles passed with the level unchanged.

The cabin came in by a hand's width. The bulkheads didn't move. The feeling did. The pump's thrum lapped at the edges of the words and took the place of any reply. Sophie passed the empty bucket again without comment. Kai took it and filled it and sent it back up. Liv watched Rhea's eyes for a sign that she had gone further away than she could afford. They were still there.

Rhea lifted a hand and pointed without lifting her head. Her finger aimed at the heater vent near the canisters. "In band," she said. The words were dry. "Don't move the heater. Please."

"We're not moving it," Liv said. She held Rhea's gaze until Rhea's eyes stayed with her and didn't drift behind her. "We're not losing those samples."

"Not even some?" Kai said. He did it in the space after, because that was where it counted. "We lose weight, we lose draw, we lose risk on the next set."

Sophie's pencil stilled. Her breath hitched and eased. Liv's palm flattened on the table.

"If you'd like, I can read the case numbers and you can pick which to watch go," Sophie said, polite on the surface.

Rhea's hand tightened on the blanket in a way that had nothing to do with fever. Color came up under her cheekbones that wasn't fever either. "No."

Liv glanced at the canisters, then at the bilge lip, then back to the seam. "We are not dumping canisters," she said. "We keep them. We keep the heater on. We keep the numbers in the window. We need a purpose that isn't just not drowning. Thank you for raising it. It's declined. Back to the wedge."

Kai took that and didn't nod. He put the bucket up and reached for the strainer again.

Ilya pushed his hand against the floor and tried to stand. His face changed before his knees moved. They didn't take him. He sank back down in a controlled way, breath tight, jaw rigid. He set his shoulders again. "I can't see your angle from here," he said through his teeth.

"You're not getting up," Liv said. She set the words down, no edge, just flat. A flicker went through him anyway. The muscle in his jaw jumped. He didn't argue. His eyes went past her to the seam.

Rhea licked her lip and missed sweat with the tip of her tongue. She drew a small arrow on a page with a pencil that had been sharpened down to the last inch. The paper had wet in one corner and ran under the lead, smearing the line into a grey fade. She drew again on a drier spot. "If you angle thirty degrees toward the keel," she said, "and put a cross-piece here," her voice thinned, "you'll get better pressure on the seam without levering the whole floor."

Liv moved to see the page. Her shadow fell across the sketch. She looked back at the seam and saw the angle Rhea meant. It would take the

push and give it somewhere to go. "We're doing it that way," she said. She looked at Kai. "Rails first. Then the wide board. We need cloth backing. Sophie, cut a strip off that old bunk cover. Leave the cores' insulation alone."

Sophie reached for the shelf above Rhea and pulled the rolled bunk cover down. The fabric had salt crystals in it from nights when they had come off watch and thrown it over wet clothes. She found a seam and tore along it by hand. The rip was straight and left a strong strip. She put the rest back and shook the strip out once to loosen grit. "Horn in two minutes," she said.

"One short," Liv said.

Sophie pressed the horn switch for one short. The tone went into the fog and came back dull. No reply. She lifted the VHF mic, got only static, hung it back on its hook, and went to fetch another bucket.

The pump ran steady. The outlet stream hit the scupper in hard pulses. The level trembled on the lip and did not cross it.

Sophie went back to the radio. She had run through channels in order three times now. This time she eased the dial through gaps between thicker hiss and thinner. The speaker gave static, a hum, then quiet. She breathed in and out and wrote the time. "I'll keep trying," she said, not looking at anyone.

"Do it," Liv said. She didn't reward the effort with anything soft. She didn't cut it down either.

Sophie touched her pencil to the donor note she'd logged before departure, while a signal bar still held. Pump cycles had taken the place of hours. "Internal review Thursday," she said. The words escaped on old habit. They sat and cooled on the table between them. No one picked them up.

Sophie cleared her throat. "Do we have, " She didn't say epoxy. "Any compound? Any resin at all?"

Liv shook her head once. "We manage with what's aboard." She kept her eyes on the seam. The sentence weighed the same as the missing kit without naming it. The silence that followed had less air in it than the space they stood in.

The boat creaked. It ran along the port side and through the table leg and up into Liv's teeth. They all turned their heads the way people turn toward a child when it cries from another room. The sound ended. No one argued after it. They went back to work.

Kai got to the bunks. The older bolts turned once, then stuck in old varnish. He set the wrench and leaned until the bolt let go and cried out metal on metal. He did not swear. He didn't have energy to waste on words that would not move a thing. He pulled a slat and handed it to Sophie. She stacked it along the starboard bench, near the heavy chain box they had dragged forward. Wood dust stuck in the sweat on his forearm. Splinters took skin and left small white mouths that would bleed later when he slowed enough to notice.

Liv set tools where she wanted them. She slid a screwdriver along the floor to catch it before it skated back into the bilge. She kept the nails in a cup. She faced the cup handle toward the same direction as the other handles, because it helped. She pressed the cloth backing along the edge of the board and checked for grit under it. She fixed the webbing around one end so she could pull in a straight line. "Ilya," she said, "packing order."

He shut his eyes and set the words up in his head and then took them down again one at a time. "Cloth to the hull. Wide board next. Cross brace. Then a longer strut set against a hard edge. Don't use the table leg; you'll need the table to stand on when you seat the next one. Use the forward bulkhead base."

Liv adjusted the plan without apologizing. "We're swapping the order on the longer strut. We'll anchor it first. The brace comes after." She didn't explain the reason. She had felt the flex in her hand. She needed

the longer strut to set the angle before the brace locked it. She glanced at him. He noticed. He didn't speak. He held himself still, as if stillness could keep what was wrong in his side from moving where it shouldn't.

Rhea made another thin line on the paper and wrote a number next to it. Her thumbprint smeared blood and pencil together. She lifted the page to find dry. Sophie caught it before it slid and set it on the galley shelf. She put the spare baking tray on top to keep it flat and out of drip. "There," she said. "It'll stay put."

"Thank you," Rhea said. Even now, that did not cost her more than she could spare. She watched Liv set the cloth strip and breathed through her mouth. Her throat worked once. Sophie slid the bucket within reach. She did not want to test which cost more.

The bilge sucked and coughed and cleared. The bucket passed up and back down.

Liv straightened and felt the pull in her lower back. She kept it to herself. She counted one-two-three and felt the shake in her hands settle into an edge she could use instead of a tremor she couldn't. She looked at Kai. "Rails and the wider slat. We'll need the ladder rung for the brace."

He moved to the ladder without speech and knocked the pins. The rung came free. He set it at her feet and went back to strips of cloth, tearing by hand. His jaw worked and then relaxed. He took the next bolt instead.

Sophie worked in the gap where words should have been. She set the radio to scan through three preset channels and left a pencil under the knob to mark where it sat on the dial. That way if someone knocked it, she could put it back without thinking. She folded a towel into a rectangle and pushed it into a seam that wept at the corner of the seat base. The weep slowed. She kept her free hand over Rhea's fingers where they lay open on her stomach. It wasn't warmth so much as shape. It kept the hand in the world.

Rhea's eyes moved from the heater's red indicator to Liv's hands and back. "Do you want thirty-five instead of thirty?" she asked. The numbers cost her breath. "On the angle. It'll push harder without skidding."

"Thirty-five," Liv said. She set the cloth again. "We'll set it, and we'll test the slip." She didn't promise it would hold. She didn't say that if it didn't hold they would pull it and set it again and keep doing that until they ran out of minutes.

"You're shaking," Sophie said suddenly. She meant Liv's hands. The words were out before she could frame them as something else. They weren't criticism. They weren't concern in the soft way either. It was data.

"I'm fine," Liv said. She didn't look up. Performative calm had a function. If it worked, she would use it. She set the board against the cloth and pushed until the cloth gave a fraction and seated. She held it while Kai brought the rung into place for the brace.

"On my say," Kai murmured. He lifted until the wood hummed under force. The hum transmitted into the hull and back into Liv's knees. She kept her breathing even and waited for the boat's next fall so they could catch the brief slack between swells.

The bulkhead clock ticked. It had not kept perfect time in years. It kept its own measure now: pump cycles, buckets, breaths held and released. The windows held only white. If dawn was lifting in the world outside, the cabin did not know it yet.

Ilya's eyes had gone to the corner again and stayed there. He breathed shallow. When the boat leaned, he shut his eyes and opened them again to keep the room in one place. He reached for the panel with two fingers and tapped twice, not because he couldn't speak, but to say he remembered that he might not be able to. It was the kind of promise a man makes when he needs to keep one thing in his control.

Sophie tilted the bottle and measured a cap again. She didn't hand it to Rhea yet. "You're hot," she said again, useless as information but true. She tucked the blanket closer without moving the leg. "Tell me if you're

cold."

"I'm both," Rhea said. She breathed in. She looked at the sketch Sophie had saved and found her place on it. She pushed the pencil over the paper with a stiff hand. "Mass here," she said. "Chain box was good. Keep everything else low."

"We will," Sophie said. She felt her own face pull tight and then stay there, like a mask you forget you're wearing until someone asks if you're all right and all you have to offer them is the shape of your mouth.

Liv set the long strut where she wanted it and braced the base against the forward bulkhead, not the table leg. The wood made a noise when it took the load, then settled. It hadn't split. Yet. She looked at Ilya just once. He had seen the choice and hadn't spoken. She read the cost in his skin. She did not add words to it.

The first wedge pack came together, cloth backing under the board, the brace set, the long strut ready. The webbing gave them a handle. Kai tied a loop in the free end so they could seat and then pull without tearing skin on the raw wood. He made the knot with his thumb and two fingers because his other nails had gone too short to catch. The knot sat clean and would come apart when they needed it to.

"We finish this and we test fit," Liv said. "We're not hammering home until we see more. If the level rises, we seat it. If it holds here, we wait for light and go in with more eyes and more hands."

Sophie nodded once, set the strip aside, and checked the window. Nothing beyond white.

Kai's mouth did something that might have been a smile on any other day. It wasn't now. He tightened the knot. He slid his palm down the edge of the board to test for snags that would catch on the cloth. He blew out a breath that didn't tremble. He lined the pack up and held it with his knee while Liv adjusted the angle.

"Thirty-five," she said again. It helped to say the number. It turned weight into a line on Rhea's paper that had use.

"Hold her," Kai said. "On the fall."

Liv set both hands and watched the water as if it could tell her when the moment would be. When the boat swung down, the pressure on the seam lightened by a hair. She moved and felt the wood find a shallow bite into cloth and hull. It wasn't a fix. It was a place. She took her hands off slow. The pack held where they left it, propped and ready. Not seated. Not committed. Ready.

The pump motor held steady. Pulses from the outlet struck the scupper. The new board changed the sound by a fraction. No one remarked on it. They stood there for a second longer than they needed to, looking at what they had made, and then returned to work because looking didn't change anything.

"When light comes," Ilya said, voice a notch louder than before, "and you see where the tear is widest, you'll want a second pack ready. Different angle. Smaller board. Don't assume a match sets twice." He rested his head against the bulkhead and released the sentence like a weight.

"We're making a second," Liv said. "Sophie, we'll need more cloth. Take the bunk cover again. Kai, rails from the other side."

Kai moved. The noise of bolts loosening had a pattern now. Tight, squeal, give, turn, out. He worked in that rhythm until the slats came free. He stacked them and slid them to Liv with his boot so he didn't have to bend twice.

Rhea's eyes closed and opened. "In band," she said. She kept saying it every few minutes. The number in the window said the same. It helped. It didn't touch the tear in the boat, but it pinned one corner of the world to the board.

Sophie bent and spoke at Rhea's ear. "We're good," she said. "We're holding." Her mouth made a shape that wanted to be a smile and couldn't get there. She pressed Rhea's hand again. Her thumb left a clean patch on Rhea's skin where the salt had drawn water to the surface. She pulled back and wiped her thumb on her trouser.

The bucket line held. The pump ran. The room stayed crooked and the people in it learned the way of that.

Liv's stomach pinched on itself. She took one cracker from the box. She broke it with her thumb and gave one quarter to Sophie, one to Kai, one to Rhea when Sophie nodded it was safe, and put the last piece in her own mouth. Dry dust stuck to her tongue. She held it there and waited until her mouth made enough spit on its own to take it down. She didn't reach for the bottle. Sophie didn't either.

"We're ready," Kai said, setting the second pack by the hatch. He pulled the webbing through his fist once to feel for grit. He found a piece and picked it out with his nail. He flicked it away. The speck landed on the floor and slid toward the bilge and disappeared with the rest of what they had shed in the last hours. Rice. Sugar. An old screw. A sliver of varnish. The day was long and not over and dawn still had not come.

The boat gave another long groan. It came from port, then aft, then it died. The sound did not announce failure. It reminded them which side mattered more, as if they needed it.

"We'll hold this for now," Liv said. "If the level climbs, we seat the first. If it holds, we wait for light, we set eyes, and we seat both with more margin."

"Copy," Kai said. He didn't add anything to it. He started tearing cloth for the third pack because the boat was teaching them to make extras in everything.

Rhea's head tilted against the back of the bench. Her eyes slipped closed and then opened when the pump cycled. She didn't say she was cold. She was. She didn't ask for more blanket. They didn't have more to

give that wouldn't come from someone else's back. Sophie arranged the jacket edge again. Rhea looked at the heater's red eye and held to that instead.

Liv scanned the room. Mugs faced the same direction on the galley shelf. The kettle sat cold. Her hands itched to straighten the dish towel and she didn't. She tallied litres in the tank and jerries, calories from tins, and minutes to the kind of light through fog that shows a seam as a line instead of a tone. That arithmetic didn't make any of them warmer or safer in the next five breaths, but it shaped the next hour. It was the only honest comfort she could give them. She chose not to offer words that would rub smooth a surface that should not be smoothed.

She went back to the seam. Her hand went to the same place first without her telling it to. It found the same pressure on the lift and the same slack on the fall. The wedge sat ready against the cloth and the wood. On her say, they would seat it. She didn't say it yet.

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Sophie set her jaw and started the next sweep without looking at the clock. She knew the time by the way her hands moved. She nudged the dial a hair and listened. Nothing that shaped into a human word came back. She wrote "no carrier" next to the last three frequencies and underlined it. She stared through the fogged window until two drops ran twin paths down the glass. She breathed once and forced her shoulders down.

Liv met Sophie's eyes and gave a small nod, then pointed her toward the bucket.

Ilya's mouth drew into a line. He set his jaw and kept any sound in. He set his head against the wall and closed his eyes and opened them. "Call me when you seat it," he said. He was not a man who liked to be where he could not put a hand on a fix.

"Stay there," Liv said. Not please. Not I'm sorry. She did not throw softness where it would curl up and die against his anger. His eyes narrowed a fraction. He held his place.

Rhea drew another arrow and wrote a number next to it. Her fingers trembled and left a jitter on the line. "If we push too hard at thirty-five and the cloth pulls, we'll get a leak around the edge. We need to ease in stages. Seat and wait. Seat again. Even pressure."

Liv bent to see. She traced the path in the air with her finger. "We'll do it that way."

The deck hardware worked a little in its bases when the swell lifted. The sound of that made a path across the cabin. Everyone's eyes followed it and then each person resumed their job.

Sophie left the radio and took the bucket. "Ready," she said as Kai passed it to her. She moved and the seam of her trouser brushed against Rhea's splint in a way that didn't jar and somehow still drew breath from Rhea with the awareness of someone else's moving body in the small room.

Liv kept the first wedge pack by the seam and checked for drift. It held where they had staged it. She went to the galley shelf, put her hand on a mug, and turned it so the handle matched the others. The action smoothed something jagged in her without solving anything for anyone else.

Kai retrieved a short rail and shaved an edge with a blade so it would sit cleaner against the board. He let the shaving fall where everything else went and dusted his palm on his thigh. His knuckles had grown rough lines in the last hour. He flexed his fingers and winced and kept his hands moving.

Rhea's voice thinned further. "If the heater dips," she said, "you tell me." She didn't say please this time. It cost extra breath to add it.

"I will," Sophie said. Her eyes went to the red indicator again. She set two fingers on the hose to feel warmth through it.

"When you seat it," she said to Kai, "you're going to want to slam. Don't. It'll split."

"Copy," he said. He didn't add the rest. He didn't say that he knew wood and force. He didn't say that everything on this boat was teaching them the cost of brute in the wrong place.

Sophie sat on her heels next to Rhea and let her head rest against the bench for a second. She closed her eyes, counted to two, and opened them. She ran the back of her thumb under Rhea's nose. The sweat was sharp with illness. She wiped her thumb again.

Rhea lifted her hand a fraction and let it fall. "I'm going to throw up," she said calmly, which meant it was a real possibility. Sophie had a bucket ready. She set it within reach. They did not have water to spare for cleaning. They would spend what they had to.

Kai steadied the brace and looked at Liv. "On you."

"We're not seating yet," she said. "Fit only."

He nodded. He knew. He had asked to make her say it out loud so the room would hear it in the structure of command and not as a wish.

He eased the brace into position again. The board sat and held. He released his hand slowly and the pack didn't creep. It would creep later under pressure. For now, it was ready.

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Liv lined them up without the please that she used when the wind was under ten and the deck was dry. "Kai, finish the second pack, then start the third. Sophie, monitor heater and radio, then hands on bucket. Rhea, eyes on the band and the flow, say drift when you see it. Ilya, keep the packing order and call corrections."

Kai's grip tightened on the slat for half a beat, then he moved.

No one said yes, ma'am. No one nodded in a way that made it look like a show. Eyes dipped. Shoulders set. Breaths held a fraction. Then movement.

Kai attacked the bunk with a speed that wouldn't break it. He pried a slat and then another and then stopped himself from twisting the third in a way that would have split it. He adjusted. He breathed out through his nose. He didn't waste words he couldn't spare. A screw fell and rang against the floor and skittered to the bilge and was gone. He set the hammer down gentler than he had picked it up.

Ilya lifted his hand and pointed low for cloth, then wider for the board. "Clamp high. Ease low. Don't fight the boat. You fight her, she wins. You go with her and pick your moment."

"We're swapping the cross and the strut," Liv said, looking down the line. "We need the strut landing in before the cross."

His eyes met hers. A breath held and went. He didn't argue.

Rhea's sheet caught a drop that fell from the ceiling and turned the pencil mark under it to fog. She pulled the paper up and winced as her leg sent a message she didn't need. Sophie had her hands under the edge before the sheet could slide. She set it on the galley shelf again and pulled an old tray over the top. "We'll protect this," she said. "It matters."

Rhea's breath eased. "It matters," she repeated. She held her hand flat on her stomach and counted breaths because numbers still worked when other things didn't.

Liv walked the line in the cabin. She put a hand on the table and then on the back of the starboard bench and then on the bulkhead. She kept her touch light to save skin from new scrapes. Inside, a small shake stayed in her forearms. It did not show in the way she moved. The calm she performed returned in the way Kai's hands didn't waste a motion and in the way Sophie's voice didn't rise when Rhea made a new sound. Ilya's

mouth unclenched for a second and then clenched again when his own body reminded him of its limits.

"Ready," Kai said of the first pack. They had already been ready. He meant the second. He set it down next to the first. He looked at the seam and then away.

She pulled the bucket and sent it up and brought it down and the muscle in her forearm jumped. Sophie kept it in line. She went back to the heater and touched the hose to feel the heat through her palm. It held. She tamped the blanket higher on Rhea's shoulders and didn't move the leg.

Liv went to the seam again and rechecked the angle. Thirty-five would be too much if they were wrong about the way the torn edge sat. It would be not enough if the tear had gotten worse. She felt for the give with the pads of her fingers and didn't flinch when the edge found her cut again. She placed her hands where they would be when she seated it for real and then took them off.

"We'll set on the fall," she said. "Not yet. On the rise, we'll watch for creep."

Kai nodded. "Copy."

The room had shifted into a rhythm that wasn't peaceful and wasn't panic. It was work. The pump marked time. The bucket carried it. The radio sat with its thin hum. The heater's light held. The wedge packs waited where they had to wait.

Rhea's skin ran hotter under the blanket. Sophie pressed the back of her hand to the fabric, then measured a cap of water and looked to Liv. Liv shook her head a fraction. Sophie set the cap down, counted, then held it up again. Liv nodded, once. Sophie tipped the water into Rhea's mouth and let her close her lips on the plastic. Rhea swallowed and winced and then lay still again.

Ilya's voice reached them from the floor. "Don't forget the cross-piece cut needs to meet the board square," he said. "Don't throw wedges at a curve and expect a straight to hold it."

Kai snorted once without humor. "We're not throwing anything." He set the saw and made a clean cut. He lifted the piece and set it aside.

Liv looked at the mug handles again and left them where they were. She looked at the kettle and imagined the sound it would make if she put it on. She let the image go. She did not want the sound to steal authority from her voice when she needed it for orders.

The first wedge stood ready by the seam. They had built a second. They were halfway through the third. They each sat like promises they couldn't guarantee. Everyone in the cabin behaved as if a promise was the same thing as a plan. It wasn't. It was enough for now.

Two more pump cycles passed. The level stayed at the access rim.

The windows held white and the cabin air stayed wet and the pump kept them from sinking by a margin that would not be visible to anyone who didn't live in those inches. Liv set her palm to the board and felt for drift again. She didn't feel it. She kept her hand there through one full rise and fall, then eased away. A thin thread slid around the cloth and beaded. On the next lift, the bead lengthened and ran toward the access.

"We wait for light," she said. "If she rises, we seat it. If she holds, we watch. Then we set it right when we can see." She watched the beads gather and start to move.

"Seat," she said.

# Chapter 4

## First Fix

Liv kept one hand on the webbing loop and the other flat on the board. The cloth under it had gone from dry to slick to a damp that held. Her cut traced the edge again and restarted its sting. She timed her breath to the pitch of the pump. On the rise, she waited. On the fall, she pulled.

On her call, the others went still.

Kai drove the brace in its track with the heel of his hand, body set but not throwing. He didn't waste force he might need in an hour. The long strut had its foot planted at the base of the forward bulkhead where the wood could take load. They had never used it this way. It used to keep a dark night warmer. Now it was a tool that would either hold a seam in place or snap its own grain.

"High," Ilya said from the floor, the word hoarse. "Hold high. Ease low. Don't chase the lift."

Liv kept her eyes on the bead line around the cloth. She waited for the pressure to ease on the down-swing. "Now," she said.

Kai leaned his weight into the rung they had stolen from the ladder. The board groaned and then bit. The cloth compressed. Liv felt it through the pads of her fingers, a fine settling against the torn inner lip that had cut her and would cut her again if she slid. She didn't slide.

"Stop," she said. "Hold."

The pump's discharge thumped against the scupper. A tighter rhythm came into it, the cavity clearing with cleaner cycles. The bucket Sophie carried splashed less on the return; her arms steadied. The bilge lip

showed a hair more metal than it had before.

"Outlet interval at three seconds," Rhea said, her voice steadier.

"Again on the fall," Ilya said. He spoke in pieces now. He paused between them as if each word had its own job. He wasn't dramatizing anything. He was dictating the only steps they had.

Liv nodded once. She didn't add please. The room did not need the word.

They waited. The boat's weight shifted, slow and inevitable. On the moment it lost a fraction of pressure against the seam, she and Kai moved together. The board seated deeper by a sliver and held there when they took their hands away.

Rhea kept her eyes half open. Her skin ran hot under the blanket Sophie had tucked around her and the jacket under the splint. She stared past them at the heater's red indicator and the slot where the thermometer appeared through foam. "In band," she said. She moved her mouth again. "Still in band."

Sophie counted pump beats under her breath. She tipped her head to hear the quieter parts of the sound. "That's steadier," she said. Her voice stayed flat.

The board shifted under Liv's palm with a small adjustment she would have missed if her hand had been on anything else. She tightened the webbing and lifted the free end out of the bilge water so it wouldn't wick and swell.

"Second pack ready," Kai said, breath thin. He wiped his hand on his trouser and didn't look at the skin he had rubbed raw.

Liv moved the first board with care to the precise angle they had marked on Rhea's sheet. Thirty-five toward the keel was what Rhea had marked when she drew it with a shaking pencil and a fever.

"We're seating this one only," Liv said. "The second stays staged unless she climbs."

Ilya's mouth tightened. "Anchor the strut first. Give it a real base."

She set the foot of the long strut where he said, against the forward bulkhead base, and pressed until the wood took the load without screaming. Then she brought the cross-piece into contact and waited for the lift to slacken.

Sophie set the bucket down and grabbed for the radio. She keyed the hand mic and sent her voice into the fog. "Mayday, Mayday, research vessel Calyptra, hull breach below the waterline, five souls aboard, all conscious; two injured, one with a leg fracture, one internal, position, " She looked at the chart trace and gave numbers. White noise and a thin tone came back. She tried the headset. The same tone ran under a smear of static. She held the talk button down, counted to two, and let go.

"No joy," she said quietly. She put the mic down, picked the bucket up, and put herself back in the line.

Liv reached for the further edge of the board. The cloth that backed it had turned darker where it met water and then darker again where the pressure forced it to match the torn shape. She looked at the lip of her cut and then ignored it. She set both hands. "On the fall."

Kai pushed the brace home on her count. This time the board took a deeper bite. A thin line of water that had been threading around the cloth hesitated, pulled back, and resettled as a shorter bead. The discharge tone climbed a narrow step. The hose thumped a fraction harder on its swing outboard.

"Hold," Liv said. She let her hands fold into stillness because shaking now would cost them contact. She waited until the boat lifted again and checked for creep. None yet. She breathed out and then in again through her nose. "Again on my call."

"Copy," Kai said.

Ilya tapped the panel he had chosen as his signal. One-two. He breathed and didn't push a sentence he couldn't finish.

Sophie ran the bucket and then stopped and listened. The rhythm in the pump had stopped faltering. Her grip whitened; her rhythm stayed even.

Rhea drew a new line on the paper and wrote a number that made sense only because it replaced the one before. "Outlet interval changed. Lower by a breath."

"Good," Liv said. She didn't clap anyone's back. She didn't reassure them past what they could verify with eyes and hands.

They held that for three more cycles. The board stayed seated. Water still moved under the floor but slower. The bucket didn't slop against Sophie's leg. Kai's jaw unclenched for two seconds and then returned to its line. Ilya shut his eyes and opened them when the boat leaned to port. He kept his world steady by keeping his eyes open on the lean.

"Second pack staged at the wider tear," Liv said, and pointed. "We don't seat unless the level climbs. Cross-brace ready to catch if the first starts to creep." She didn't ask if anyone disagreed. They didn't.

Kai slid the second pack into position without engaging it. The cloth edge just touched hull. He set the webbing so that when she gave the word it would move without catching. He wiped water from the handle with the side of his wrist and kept his mouth shut.

"Horn," Sophie said. "Top of the hour."

"One short," Liv said.

The blast ran through the wheel and faded. No reply.

The cabin was still crooked, but the floor threw less water toward the low side. The hatch stayed shut and kept an edge of dryness in the saloon. It wasn't enough to rest. It was enough to stand in against the next hour.

"We're no longer losing this minute," Liv said. She looked at the clock that didn't keep true time and at the white of the windows that didn't change. "We hold this and we buy hours."

They went back to work. The room stayed quiet. Hands moved steadier.

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Two hours. Two horns. No reply.

By then the cabin air cooled into the last hours before dawn. The first board had begun to take up water. You could see it along the cut edge where the carpenter's plane had left a pale face and now the color deepened. The grain lifted under Liv's fingers when she checked it. The bolts that held the cross-piece creaked on the rise. She put the back of her fingernail against a washer and felt it move when the swell pressed. She shifted her shoulder against the bench and waited through the next lift. She didn't let it move more than that.

She took a pencil and drew a line along the brace so she could see if it went off its mark by a hair. She folded the pencil into her hand and went back to the pump rhythm without saying that she had done it. She flexed the webbing loop once and let it lie slack.

The pump's tone lowered half a note. It wasn't something a stranger would hear. Sophie heard it. Kai heard it. Ilya's breath hitched when it happened.

Liv watched the surface at the bilge lip. It trembled and then came up against the edge of the opening and held there. It tried again. The hose thumped harder to keep pace with it. Kai cleared the strainer with more frequency. He cursed under his breath when a rag strand folded and broke his rhythm.

Rhea had drifted. Her face had lost some of the strain. The fever worked in and out of her, and when it came closer she spoke without checking if words would land. "Second pack wants nine degrees over on the starboard end," she said to the air. "It's a longer tear than the first reads at this angle. You'll need to take pressure on the strut before you do

it, or the cloth will pull."

Kai glanced to Rhea and then to the wood. He nodded once. He retied the webbing at the second pack and checked the strut foot.

A new sound came from the brace. It wasn't loud. It was clean. Liv went to her pencil line and saw that the brace had left it by about a millimeter. Not a centimeter. Half the width of the lead. A millimetre now was minutes later. She set her hand on the wood and felt the swell push through it. She didn't seat anything new. She touched the metal head of the bolt. It was warm from the room, not from friction. She backed it a quarter turn and then brought it home again, just enough to stop the singing. A faint tick started on each fall and went quiet on the lift. It kept time with the swell.

Ilya dozed for a few breaths and woke with a small jerk. He made a sound that didn't ask for help and then put his hand back to the panel and tapped twice, the same pattern as before.

Sophie opened her mouth to say his name and shut it. She went to the galley shelf and did something tidy with the handles of the mugs. It cost nothing. It was one small thing she could keep straight.

Liv lay down without lying back. She put her shoulder against the bench and kept her eyes on the brace and the board and the lip of the bilge. She counted in threes because threes got her through lifts and falls without thinking about them. One-two-three and hold. One-two-three and move. One-two-three and listen for the sound that would mean the wedge had gone. She thought about the taste of the food she had allowed them. It had been something her body registered and then forgot. She let it go.

The air in the cabin had settled into a blend of damp wool, bleach from earlier, and blood that had stopped spreading but hadn't left. There was rubber from the heater hose and the heated dust it burned away. When Sophie moved, the small clean smell of the soap she had used on her own hands earlier cut through things for a second and then went

away.

Sophie rechecked Rhea's splint. The bandage had gone damp where the jacket met it. She slid cloth under that edge and tied a new strip above the break. Rhea's teeth came down on a folded square of bunk cover that still held salt from old nights. Her breath was loud in the space between the pump pulses.

"We're firming above and below," Sophie said. "I'm not touching the break."

Rhea nodded. She fixed on the heater's red indicator and the pencil Sophie had stuck under the radio dial and moved her gaze between those two points.

"Liv," Ilya said. He had his hand on his side as if he could hold something in place by making a fist over it. "Burp the cloth. You've got a bubble under there."

"How much?" she asked.

"Two millimeters off on the fall. Don't lift the whole face. Just a breath. Then seat again."

Liv took hold of the webbing and placed her palm on the board exactly where she needed to feel any small change. Kai set his hands on the brace but didn't add force.

"On me," she said.

They felt the boat give a little and she eased the board a hair. Air made a soft sound against the cloth. Not much. Enough. When the lift dropped, she set it in again. The board pressed deeper without fuss. The tiny line that had formed along the cloth's edge disappeared. The discharge tone rose by another fraction and stayed there.

"That's better," Ilya said, almost to himself. He let his head go back to the bulkhead and let his shoulders drop for one second.

Sophie keyed the radio again. She used the same words as before. Her grip on the mic tightened, then eased. The white sound came back. The high whine ran under the static, steady.

"No joy," she said. Her knuckles loosened by a notch.

Kai passed the bucket. His hand cramped on the rim and he let it fall a fraction in the pass. The water slopped. He flicked his fingers hard and took the next thing in his other hand. He kept moving.

Another debt on the ledger.

Liv watched his hands. She said nothing about his fingers. "Switch to the strainer. Three cycles. Then back."

"Copy," he said. He bent and cleared the mesh with a practiced twist, a slap against the side, and a push back into place. The pump dipped and took again. He returned to the cycle without comment.

Rhea pushed the cloth out of her mouth and said, almost conversational, "If you can spare a strip under the far edge of the second board, cut it on the bias. It'll stack cleaner."

"I've got it," Sophie said. She tore fabric in a straight line until the weave gave up a neat strip. She slid it under the staged board and smoothed it with her palm.

The smell in the cabin had changed in the last hour. Less diesel. More of wet wood that would fluff into grain you could lift with a fingernail if you tried. The rubber smell from the heater hose held even as air moved. The antiseptic tang from where Sophie had cleaned Rhea's leg earlier sat under the other smells like a truth they couldn't dress in anything else.

Liv took a tin from the crate that had not broken and braced it between her knees to open. The pull ring bit into her finger. She counted to three while the lid came up. She handed the tin to Sophie and then to Kai.

"One minute," she said. "No water." She tapped the face of the clock with her knuckle. "Now."

Kai ate three small mouthfuls and handed the tin on. Sophie swallowed two and pushed it toward Rhea. Rhea took a bite without moving her head. She closed her eyes on the swallow. She passed the tin to Liv. Liv put a spoon in her mouth and held the food there until her mouth made enough moisture to take it down. The taste had no shape. It arrived and it left. Relief had a small place in it anyway.

"Time," Liv said. She put the lid back on what remained. She took a cloth to her hands, wiped the spoon, and set everything in the same orientation on the shelf without thinking about it.

Eyes met across the cabin and then moved to jobs. The pact had not changed. It had gotten clearer.

The boat held an uneasy trim, bow deeper than made sense in calm water, stern lighter than comfortable. The heavy box of chain forward starboard kept its weight in place and earned its keep again. The heater's fan ran low; its red indicator didn't waver. The bilge level sat under the lip and quivered but didn't climb.

"We keep this," Liv said. "Two hours and the light will do something through that." She nodded toward the smeared window. "We don't touch the second until then unless the level climbs."

"Copy," Kai said. He didn't add his usual edge. He had already spent it on the brace.

"Sophie, sweep again on the quarter hour," Liv said. "Then bucket. Track the draw by feel. Don't let yourself watch the numbers too hard."

Sophie pressed her palm to the heater hose and nodded. "Warm," she said. She set her hand at Rhea's throat for a second to feel the beat there and then moved it away. She returned to the radio and to the bucket. She let her voice go flat. It was the only way to stop the wobble.

Ilya murmured something Liv couldn't hear and then folded it into a breath that didn't have room for speech. He kept his fingers spread on the floor to feel vibration the way he would have in the engine room if he had

been allowed to stand. He had taught her that trick on a different boat that had thrown them in a different way. He had taught her to read load through panels and fasteners. He didn't say it now.

The work moved without drama for eight pump cycles. No one believed in peace. They believed in not letting the level rise before dawn.

"We can't hold this flex forever," Kai said. He stated the cost. "But it's still working."

"We need light," Liv said. "No exterior work in the dark."

"I know," he said. He rubbed his hand where the cramp had been and rolled his shoulders.

Sophie set the horn off one more time. The wheel spoke trembled and then went still. No answering sound. She put her head down for one second and kept her mouth closed. Her breath caught and evened.

Rhea said another number and then closed her eyes. She didn't go away from them when she did it. She stayed in the room by keeping the numbers between them.

Liv listened for the crack she hoped not to hear. When the boat fell, the brace complained in a tiny voice. When it rose, the board didn't creep. She kept counting. The pump hit the higher note for a breath and then dropped back. The surface touched the lip and held there. One-two-three. The level drew a straight line against the edge of the opening and then laid it down a shade higher. No one named it.

The window thinned a shade. Not yet light. Her eyes adjusted before the glass brightened.

She pushed herself up. She ran a hand over her face and felt salt and grit and something sticky from a cut she had not bothered to wipe in the last hour. She went to Rhea's sheet and peeled the tray back just enough to not smudge the pencil. The numbers were in a column that had become steadier and then started climbing a little again.

"We're still buying time," she said. She didn't add what for.

The light found a way to make itself visible in the fog and the condensation on the glass. It wasn't bright. It moved the room's shadows from one place to another. No one spoke to it. The bilge sat a finger-width above the lip.

Liv looked at the second pack. The cloth sat ready under the smaller board. The webbing lay coiled the way Kai had left it.

"When we can see edges," she said, "we set the second on the angle Rhea marked. We'll move the strut first."

"Copy," Kai said. He wiped his face with his sleeve and left a clean strip on his skin where his hand had been. He didn't notice.

Sophie measured a cap of water and looked at Liv. Liv held up her hand. "Not yet."

Rhea opened her eyes. "In band," she whispered, and then, because she had to own the whole truth, "Barely."

"We keep it," Liv said. Her voice did not rise. She turned the mug handles on the shelf until they faced the same way again. She set her hand on the board and waited for the next fall.

The pump pulled. The hose struck outboard. The level put its lip against the edge and spilled a fraction over and then drew back. Outside, the light stayed dull in the fog. Inside, the ledger was litres and minutes and wood under load. Liv placed her palm where it had to go and timed the next move.

"On the fall," she said, and the room answered with movement instead of words.

# Chapter 5

## Compartment Debate

Dawn was slow. The windows went from white to a duller white. The pump kept its rhythm. The pencil mark by the brace she'd put down in the last hour stayed where she'd left it. She watched for any shift. The bilge sat a finger-width above the lip and wobbled there when the swell shifted them.

The first wedge held. The second lay staged on a clean strip of cloth where Kai had left it. The ladder rung carried the strain without splitting. Liv had her palm on the seated board when Ilya spoke.

"Trim aft," he said. His voice came in flattened pieces. "Flood. Keep it boxed."

Liv kept her hand in place and watched the bead at the cloth edge shorten and lengthen with the boat's slow movement. "We need buoyancy, not more water."

"We need posture," Ilya said. He had one hand pressed to his side, two fingers pressing along a tender line, trying to set a limit for himself. "We're rolled left. Bow's sunk. The board takes the wrong kind of load. You feel it." He didn't ask it. He knew she did.

The pump's tone held flat for two beats and dragged for one. Sophie had set the radio to scan through three presets and let it cycle with no change. The same thin tone continued under the static. She looked at the board, the hose, and Liv's hand. She'd stopped narrating hope this past hour.

"Tell me the third way," Liv said. It came out clipped. She had meant to soften it and did not.

Kai lifted his head from the strainer and shook grit off his fingers. "There isn't one you can have now. Dead later is still dead. Upright now gives us an hour."

"We can move mass," Liv said. "Chain's forward starboard. Spare battery up a tier. We can shift the tool bin."

Ilya shut his eyes and opened them. "You did that. We did that. It's small. We need something that counts." He left a beat before the last word. "Flood aft."

Sophie's mouth moved before sound came. "What goes under?" She took a breath and made herself finish. "Specifically. I need to hear it." Her eyes slid off Liv's for a second and then came back on.

Liv looked past Sophie to the low hatch in the aft bulkhead. It was shut and latched because she had ordered it shut. She pictured what was stored behind it. "Coils of line. Two spare fenders. A cracked bucket. The old mooring warp. A bin of bolts. The paint tin with the missing lid. The canvas we swore we'd mend and didn't. None of it is warm or alive."

Rhea was awake again, eyes half open. The skin at her forehead shone and then dulled. She had the pencil and her sheet under the baking tray. She pushed the tray a little to free a corner. "The stern doesn't have to sink much," she said. Her breath rasped at the end. "Two centimeters buys us a measurable change. Outlet interval to four seconds. Maybe five. Pressure differential at the seam drops. Less saw on the cloth."

"We seat the second board now," Liv said, because she had to put another thing on the table to test for truth. "We get ahead of the rise and then we don't trade buoyancy for posture."

Rhea flipped the pencil and set the eraser against the paper to steady her hand. "Not in this light. Edge will pull. You'll chase a slide you can't see."

The pump dragged and climbed back. The hose hit the scupper and came off with a thump.

"You want to say later," Kai said. It wasn't a question.

Liv watched the bead. It shortened when the boat settled. It didn't vanish. "I want this to be enough without spending what we can't get back."

"It isn't," Ilya said. He spoke in short, careful words; his ribs left him little room. "Trim aft."

Sophie swallowed and nodded once. "If we do it, we do it cleanly. No surprises." She reached for the log and wrote "aft hatch: on my word only" on the damp page and underlined it once. The pencil dug into the paper.

"You don't take the saloon," Liv said. "The port-side hatch stays shut. We do not lose this dry edge." She put her other hand flat on the bench to steady herself.

Ilya moved his fingers against the floor, matching the pump's cycle. "Flood aft only. Crack. Then hold. Raise it to line. Box the rest."

Liv set numbers in her head. Litres. Calories. Minutes. In that order and all mixed anyway. She heard herself ask, even though she knew the answer, "We can shift the heavy chain more."

"It's already in the right place," Rhea said. She blinked hard once and opened her eyes to keep them on the heater indicator. "It's doing its job. This is a different job."

She let go. "Sophie, you stay with Rhea and the board. Call anything that changes. Kai, lines on the aft hatch handle and the next handhold over. I want control on it, not speed. Ilya, talk him through the crack and the hold."

Kai was already working a line through the hatch handle and back to a cleat on the bench base so it could play and lock. He didn't ask for permission to start. He didn't have to. He looked at Liv, steady, not polite, and she saw he'd already decided while she'd been trimming words.

She set aside the urge to say wait.

"On me," Liv said. "We open on my count and no one improvises past that." She drew her hand away from the board and felt the sting of the cut reassert itself. She ignored it. "We choose where the water goes. That's all this is."

Kai tied a stopper knot, checked the lead two times, and set his body against the pull. "Ready."

Sophie's eyes went to the clinometer and back to Liv's face. The instrument had fogged halfway across. She wiped it with her sleeve and kept looking.

"Liv," Ilya said. "High. Hold high. Ease low. Same as the board."

She nodded once. The room settled. Shoulders squared to the new task.

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She marked three beats in her head.

"Crack it," Liv said. "A hand's width."

Kai pulled the line through and twisted the latch. The hatch moved with a stick and then gave. A dark seam opened and the sound that belonged to enclosed water came clear. It was thinner than the main bilge and had a different pitch.

The floor under Liv's boots shifted at one point, then settled a fraction and held.

"Hold," she said. "Count."

"One, two, three," Sophie said without looking at the clock. She used Liv's numbers. They held seconds steady. "Heel easing a degree to starboard." The left pull eased through level, a hair into starboard.

The pump's tone changed a little. It was less strained and more even. The hose hit the scupper with the same thump but came off it cleaner.

Liv looked at the first wedge. The bead at the cloth edge shortened and held for longer between tries. Rhea had her eyes open and the pencil against the paper and marked a new interval.

"Four..." Rhea said, and drew the mark. "...and a breath."

"Open another hand's width," Liv said. "Then hold."

Kai let the line slip under control. The hatch mouth widened, and water moved aft. The level in the aft cavity rose. Liv watched the level in the main bilge drop by the height of her fingernail and then by a little more. It came back up and didn't touch the lip.

Sophie looked over and met Rhea's eyes. She touched the hose on the heater and then set her palm to the deck. "Warm," she said. "In band?"

Rhea didn't look away from the thin slot in the foam where the thermometer sat. "In band." She shifted her mouth. "Barely."

"We keep it," Liv said. She had already said the same words an hour earlier. The words had not worn out. They were still the only ones that fit.

Ilya's head had been against the bulkhead. He lifted it a little and then let it go back. The tension in his neck let go at the edges. "Good," he said. A single word that didn't praise anyone and didn't ask for a thing.

"Hold this," Liv said. "No more for now." She kept her eyes on the hatch. "We mark the level."

Kai took one small pull on the control line and eased it back until the latch stopped it. He had set a second line to a lower eye so the weight would run against a fixed point. He kept his hands quiet and ready. He kept his eyes open and still.

The boat's roll didn't vanish. It lost the mean left pull that had made every reach across the cabin a fight. Sophie didn't have to lean as far to put the bucket in the place where it would catch and not move. The board at the seam made less noise under Liv's fingers. The pencil line by the brace stayed where she'd marked it.

"We're buying rhythm. Nothing more," Liv said.

Sophie's head moved in a tight nod. "I can work in this."

Rhea wrote a number and then put the pencil down to rest her hand. Her lips had gone the pale color of her skin and then red again. She didn't ask for water. She had heard Liv say no the last hour. She swallowed and said nothing.

Liv placed her palm flat against the first board again. The cloth under it felt matched. The cut along the torn inner lip had stopped finding new edges to catch her. It was still there.

"We hold this state," she said, and made the words simple. "Port-side hatch stays shut. Aft hatch stays half. We do not share this water with rooms we want to keep."

Sophie wrote the words as law. Her underline caught on the damp fiber.

Ilya lifted his fingers from the panel and put them down again. "Strut's good," he said, not looking at it. He had felt it through the floor. "Keep it there."

Liv didn't smile. She didn't have that to give. She let the pumps run through two more cycles and then three. The bilge sat below the lip and stirred without climbing. The small knocks eased.

"Time," Sophie said after a beat, glancing at the clock because she couldn't help herself even when the numbers meant less. "Top of the hour comes in six minutes. Horn on it?"

"One short," Liv said. "On the hour."

Kai hadn't moved more than he had to. His stance held. He looked at the aft hatch and at the line and did not relax his hand even when Liv had told him to hold.

"Good," Ilya said again. The word cost him less this time. He shut his eyes and stayed in the room anyway. He knew where he was. He knew

what his hands used to do when the boat sounded like this. He didn't try to do them. He had given his work away to other hands and was not taking it back.

Liv watched the water behind the hatchline rise in a clean band. The load had shifted aft. The breach at the seam did not stop. Other tasks were possible again. She could work with this.

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She kept a ledger in her head. When Sophie looked down at "flood," Liv filed it. Sophie had underlined too hard; the pencil point caught. Rhea's pencil stuttered once on the calculation sheet. Kai didn't blink. Ilya watched the brace; he knew what had to happen next.

Sophie set the horn off on the hour. The blast vibrated the wheel and faded into fog. No reply.

"Nothing yet," she said, and put the mic down without adding anything. She set the bucket in its place and kept the line moving.

Kai was already looking past the hatch. "We should put something under the hull." He didn't raise his voice. He didn't sell the plan. He waited for her call. The roll had steadied; that gave them a short window to send a line under.

Sophie said, "Is there a plan that doesn't involve more water?" Her voice had steadied again. It had the clipped shape Liv recognized when Sophie had swallowed something that tasted wrong and still had to say words.

"No," Ilya said. He didn't look up. He had found a clean piece of paper under the tray and the calculation sheet. His hand shook and still made lines that were true enough. "Lines fore and aft. Make a messenger. You need a weight to send it down and under. Keep tension starboard. Keep edges clean."

Liv listened and watched his hand. He drew a rectangle and then crossed it with two lines and put arrows at the edges. He added circles where the lines would have to come up on deck. He wrote no words at first and then put down two numbers and pushed the paper toward her.

"Say it again," she said, because making it hers took hearing it in his voice and then hearing it in hers.

"Messenger under the hull," Ilya said. "Tie the canvas corners to it. Take it under, not across. Forward take-up first. Keep it from dragging the cloth off the board. Keep the load on starboard." He took a breath without taking in enough air and made it count anyway. "Seat it on the fall."

Liv looked at the lines and made her mouth say the order he had made. "Messenger under. Corners to messenger. Forward take-up first. Keep starboard tight. It keeps the cloth from peeling at the keelward edge. Seat on the fall." She did not add that they would do it without slamming. That rule had already given them one improvement this hour.

Kai nodded and stood partway as if he could climb into the next action by lifting his hips off the bench. "We have a weight. The lead from the anchor locker."

"Boathook to clear it if it catches," Ilya said. He put two dots on the paper where they would have to be careful. "Don't chase it if it hangs wrong. Ease and try again."

Sophie touched the paper. There was damp on her fingers from the heater hose. She didn't wipe it on her trousers. "I'll keep you tied in and mark timing."

Rhea made a sound in her throat to call attention to herself without having to spend more breath. "Am I staying in?" She looked at the companionway and then down at her leg like it surprised her that the question could even exist. "I'm guessing I'm staying in."

"You're staying in," Liv said. She sat beside Rhea for a single beat and put her hand over Rhea's wrist where the skin ran hot. "We will not move you. We will keep you warm and we will keep the heater on. Sophie will be here and there. I will be watching what I cannot see by listening."

Rhea nodded, a tight movement. "In band now." Her mouth flattened. "Don't lose it."

"It stays on," Liv said. She did not promise.

Rhea's breath rasped once.

She stood and looked around the cabin. The bunks on one side were already missing their rails. Cloth strips lay coiled and then half uncoiled near the hatch where they had cut them. The webbing they hadn't used yet sat in a wet pile. The exposed bolts had a shine she didn't trust. The room showed framing, tools, and dirt where panels used to hide them. The mugs in the rack faced the same way. It had been private space and wasn't now. That was fine. Privacy did not buy them anything here.

"Lines," she said to Kai, and he was already collecting them and laying them in coils he could pick up without looking. He had chosen the ones that would not go stiff if they took more water.

Sophie watched the bucket stop edging across the sole and put the radio where she could hit the transmit without knocking the dial off the mark she had made with a pencil. She looked at Liv and at the companionway and back. "I'll keep the call running."

"Do it," Liv said. She didn't say please. She took the weight from Kai and watched how it sat on the rope. She set the knot so it would not slip and not spread.

"Liv," Ilya said from the floor. She turned to him and he said it without kindness and without edge. It was consent and requirement at once. "You keep them tied. You kill it if the angle goes wrong."

She met his eyes only for the space of the order. "I will kill it if the angle goes wrong."

He shut his eyes and nodded. He did not say good. He didn't need to grade her.

Liv stepped to the companionway and felt a slight new steadiness underfoot. She put the lines over her arm and took the weight in her hand and used the minutes they had to move.

She looked back one last time before she made herself stop looking. Rhea's eyes were on the heater indicator. Sophie's hands were on the bucket and the radio. Ilya's fingers were flat on the floor. Kai was already halfway up the ladder.

The windows had lifted from dull white to dirty grey, enough to see edges. "We're going now," she said. She didn't wait for anything that sounded like agreement. Cold air seeped at the hatch seam. Sea eight degrees. Hands would slow. She reached for the hatch slide.

The pump paused in the small silence that followed and then resumed.

# Chapter 6

## Tarp Dive

The hatch slid open and took the warm edge with it. Air came in hard and final, the kind that seized the throat and let go only when you forced it. The boat gave a slow roll to port and then back through, the deck scuffed under boots that were always wet. Liv set the coil over her forearm and pinned the lead weight against her side. She left no slack in her body that could catch. The aft hatch held at half; the main bilge sat below the lip. That was the only reason to go outside.

"Bring your right arm up," Sophie said, already taking the tail of the line that lay across Kai's chest. Her fingers worked fast and clean. "Under the arm. Not too tight. I want room for your lungs." Her mouth tightened on the last word without turning into a warning.

Kai lifted and let her pass the line. He kept his eyes on Liv, not for assurance, just to match her count.

"Hold still," Sophie said. She set the knot high and pulled until the line bit, then checked the bite with two short tugs. She looked at Liv and repeated the same knot on her, bringing the line across Liv's sternum and under the opposite arm. The working end went on a cleat at the companionway base and she made it secure. A second tie ran forward to the starboard chainplate base so the load would spread if either cleat failed. "You're tied in." She didn't add be careful or don't drown. She had stopped spending those words an hour ago.

Ilya's hand moved against the floor, tracing the pump's vibration. He pushed his head a fraction off the bench and said, "Forward first. Keep starboard tight." His breath cut the sentence into pieces. "Seat on the fall. If it hangs." He held a beat until the next breath came. "Ease. Try again.

Under. Not across."

Liv knelt by him long enough to hear it through twice and say it back in her words. "Forward take-up first. Starboard stays tight. On the fall. No chasing. We ease if it snags." She kept one hand on the edge of Rhea's calculations under the baking tray so it wouldn't slide when the boat moved. The paper had soaked to the feel of skin. "Sophie, you have timing and ties. Rhea, you call anything you see out that window or at the heater."

Rhea's hands were stiff under the blanket. Her glasses sat crooked from the cracked hinge. She lifted her head off the folded jacket. "Give me something that counts." There was more in it than the words. She kept looking at the murky rectangle of window and the short section of waterline it showed. "I can read angles from here."

"You're our spotter," Liv said. "You watch the wedge and the lines. If anything creeps or crosses, you say it."

Rhea's mouth made a shape like she was going to argue and then closed around the job. "Copy." She pushed the pencil's eraser against the paper to take the shake out of her hand. "Heater's in band. Barely." She did not ask for water. She had heard no and knew the reason.

Liv set her palm on the seated board once more. The cloth under it felt matched. The pencil line along the brace was where she had left it. The wood still lifted a grain here and there where it drank from the air. She took her hand away. She could not hold all of it in one body.

Kai wiped his face with the back of his wrist and then forgot he had done it. He checked his own knot and then checked Liv's, found nothing to fix, and stepped onto the ladder without looking for a nod. He was the opposite of quick talk. He didn't fill gaps; he moved.

"On me," Liv said. She slid the hatch back the rest of the way. The cold seeped into the space behind her collar. "We go now."

The cockpit had a layer of spray on it that didn't freeze and didn't warm. The fog sat close, a light that made edges without showing anything beyond the rail. Liv clipped onto the jackline, then tied off the weight to the messenger. The lead was old but true; it hung on the rope's throat and said where it would go. She eased to the waist over the rail on the tether. Eight-degree water locked her breath and pressed her jacket flat; the rope under her arm bit.

"Boathook," she said.

Sophie placed it in her hand without looking down. "Clock's not the boss of me right now," she said under her breath and then, louder: "Cadence on my count. Watch the lift. On the fall, now."

Liv tossed the weight. It went under clean, slid along the hull rather than banging, and took the line with it. The rope played out smooth then tugged; pressure built where it made the far turn beneath the keel. The boat rose, fell, and Liv kept the line from sawing on the coaming. Kai took the port-side stance, leaning his weight over the low rail until the messenger showed a pale shadow under the surface.

"There, there," Sophie said. She leaned out, boathook extended, and coaxed the messenger up. It skinned the surface and slipped back under. She held her position and eased rather than stabbing. The second time it came up inside the reach of the hook, she lifted and brought it over the rail.

"Forward take-up first," Liv said. She handed the messenger end to Kai. "I'll tie the forward corner."

They had chosen the old canvas that had sat in the aft without mending. It was heavy and cold in her hands. She got the forward corner onto the messenger, then looped the lashing line through the grommet and made sure the first knot was one she could undo under load if she had to. Her fingers were already slow. She curled them against the fabric to regain a little feeling and made the second knot with deliberate moves.

Sophie watched the swell pattern. "On the fall. Now." She kept her voice low and even, the kind that got people to move in the right direction inside a crowded room.

Liv and Kai lowered the forward corner into the water. The canvas sank and dragged. The messenger line began to draw the corner under the hull. Liv fed the line from her hands, then checked the starboard tension. There was a slack that didn't belong there.

She said, "Starboard tight," and Sophie pulled an even three hand-widths on the starboard line and belayed it quick. The boat rose. Liv held steady and felt the canvas catch the lift and then give.

"On the fall," Sophie said again. "Now." Her hands were steady on the lines. She didn't look at the radio when a faint tone bled through the static. She put the boathook within reach and kept her body between the lines and the companionway so no one would trip them. Liv ducked under with the drop and came up coughing once, salt burning her nose, and kept the forward line.

"Forward's coming," Kai said. He was already at the aft corner, line across his shoulder. His hair stuck in a curve at the back of his head where the spray had turned it into one piece. He didn't try to smooth it. He didn't have the spare energy for vanity.

The canvas rolled under the hull and showed a dark edge where it cleared the turn. Liv held the forward line taut as the corner's grommet came around. She reached and caught it before it slid too far, set her foot against the coaming for leverage, and brought the corner to the level of the messenger. She tied it in short, tight work.

"On the drop," Sophie said. "Now." She made it the room's heartbeat. It took the place of the clock and a lot of talk.

The first lift hit harder than the last one had. It threw water in a fan through the cockpit and drove Kai's shoulder into the hull. He went loose in the rope for an instant and then gripped. The tether bit under his ribs. A thin tone cut through the lift; his jaw locked before it passed. His eyes

went distant for a beat and came back. He tightened the aft line on the next fall. He did not look at Liv. If he had, she would have called him off.

"Again," he said through his teeth. He brought the aft corner up by the messenger and set the first hitch. The knot came slow. His fingers didn't feel the far side of the rope where they should.

"Ease starboard a hand," Rhea's voice carried from the cabin. She had pressed her face to the window and found the angle despite the fogging. "It's pulling too steep on your forward. You'll peel the cloth under the wedge if you hold that."

"Ease starboard," Sophie said. She gave one hand's worth of slack, let it settle, and belayed. She didn't add a question. She trusted the watch at the window.

Ilya called, "Seat on the fall," from his place on the floor. He didn't lift his head this time. He didn't have to. His hand on the panel told him where the boat was in its rise and its drop.

Liv pulled the forward line tight and then held it, waiting for the boat to sink again. She felt the change through the canvas, a transition from ragged to steady pull. It wasn't less force. It was a cleaner kind. The canvas had found the hull and stopped skating against it.

"Now," Sophie said, and the three of them worked the same moment, forward line tight, starboard tension set, aft corner brought into the same plane. The canvas took a set. Liv watched the edge disappear under the waterline, then looked back through the hatch. At the scupper, the outlet hiss steadied. The bead along the cloth at the wedge's edge shortened and held.

The pump's note lifted a fraction without anyone telling it to. The hose at the scupper hit and came off with less struggle. Liv counted a measure with her tongue against her teeth she hadn't had room to count since the strike: one, two, three, four, and a breath. She hadn't paid herself that extra breath in hours.

"Hold this," she said without raising her voice. "No-one chases a bad angle."

There was a catch under the forward corner, something you couldn't see but could feel, the way a sheet snags on a splinter. The line hummed. Sophie picked up the boathook, touched the hook to the edge without leverage, and feathered away the snag. She eased the line by two fingers at Liv's nod and then took the slack back. The hum stopped. "We don't say set until it holds three lifts," Sophie said, quiet, still on the lines. She logged a short line without looking, left the time blank. The clock didn't matter.

"Liv," Kai said, low. He set his hips against the coaming to keep steady and finished the aft corner ties. His breath shook once and then evened. "Next pull."

"On the fall," Sophie said, and they settled the fabric deeper into its own seat. The canvas lay smoother against the hull; flow at the torn lip eased. The breach wasn't fixed.

Inside, Rhea put the pencil to the paper and drew a line further apart from the last mark. "Five," she said, and a small, tired grin took the edge off her mouth. Her forehead shone with fever and she let the grin fade, but she kept the number.

Liv's hands had gone past aching and into that flat space beyond, where they did what they had to while sensation waited outside. She gave the forward line one final set and left it. She held the starboard and tried to feel if there was any creep. There wasn't.

Sophie took the lines in firm wraps around the cleats, tied off, and tested for shift. "Set," she said. It was the kind of word that let people rest a little without sleeping.

"Set. Up," Liv said. She put her hand on the messenger and raised it enough to get the weight off the corner. They had no reason to send it under again unless something changed. "Back in."

It took more strength to come back aboard than it had to go over. Sophie and the lines did most of the lifting. Liv felt the rope come into her harness and then hands on her shoulders. She got her boots on the coaming and cleared in two ugly moves that saved effort by spending balance. Kai took one extra beat at the rail, too long, and then was over it with a clatter that sent a tremor into the deck. He sat with his back to the companionway bulkhead and swallowed air like he had to talk the body into remembering how to use it.

"In," Liv said again, and her voice was smaller now only because breath took up the rest. She went down the ladder first because the deck did not get a say in who led.

The cabin hit them as heat and wet wool and the cleaner that had never fully left the air. Kai reached for the mug Sophie pressed at him and missed it. His hand shook hard enough to throw the handle off his fingers.

"You're moving," Liv said. She didn't make it a suggestion. She put a dry jacket around his shoulders and pulled the zipper up past the place where his chest wanted to fight her. "Stamp. Ten each foot. Roll your shoulders. Two in, one out on the fall."

His glare brushed Liv and then dropped to the floor, and he put his feet down hard until some feeling came back. He rolled his shoulders through a slow range and let a breath out that didn't rattle. "Copy," he said without drama, and kept stamping. He set his breath to it.

Sophie stood at the coaming and stared at the forward line. There was a tone that came at a certain lift and died on the drop. She put it in the log, light hum at forward corner on higher lift; ceased after ease-and-take, and left it at that. Her mouth closed on anything beyond the fact.

Ilya rolled onto an elbow and choked once into his sleeve. The wool dragged against his lip. He swallowed before anyone could look full at him and turned the fabric over so the darker spot wouldn't show as easily,

before any eyes could go there and break the minute. He lifted his head without showing the effort and said, "Good."

Rhea's teeth clicked without rhythm under the blanket. She kept her face turned toward the small window and the strip of side that showed a bit of canvas underwater when the swell sat just right. "Outlet at five," she said. The pencil pressed through the damp paper, and she dragged it back a line and got it to stay. She let out a sound that could have been a laugh in a different room. It cut out early.

Liv checked the wedge with her palm again. The pressure was different now. Not less. Easier to live with. It had stopped sawing the cloth. She pressed the webbing against the board to feel for any slip and found none. The pump ran hard and steady. The hose knocked the scupper and came off without the extra slap.

She looked at each of them and let the thanks come in a voice without decoration. "Good work, Kai." She waited for his stamp to finish and saw the skin gain a little colour at the knuckles. "Sophie, lines and cadence. That held us." She glanced at the log entry she hadn't asked for and found exactly the words she would have written. "Rhea. Keep those numbers. Tell me if the band dips."

Rhea lifted the corner of the blanket like she was saluting with the fabric. "In band," she said. "Barely." She might have smiled at the absurdity of calling that a success if it hadn't cost her too much.

Liv's eyes moved to Ilya. "Your plan sat."

He moved his hand on the floor to show he heard, not because he had anything extra to say. He didn't take credit. There was nothing tidy about the credit here.

Sophie kept watching the lines. The forward corner quieted completely now that it had the set it wanted. She marked the time out of habit, crossed it out, then drew a small arrow to the word set and boxed it.

Kai's shivering settled into something that could pass for useful. He rubbed his hands together and blew into them without asking for heat. "We're holding for now."

"We hold and we buy hours," Liv said. She wasn't aiming at inspiration. It was a ledger line. She looked at the cabin as if it were a person to account to. "Port-side hatch stays shut. Aft stays at half. No one changes that unless Sophie writes it and I say it."

"Logged," Sophie said. She underlined it and didn't carve too deep into the page this time.

A small, steady drip from the ceiling tapped the baking tray above Rhea's sheet. Sophie slid the tray a centimetre and caught the drip in a different spot and set it back. The sound went away. Rhea shifted under the blanket to get her leg in a position where the splint didn't fight her back.

"Timer on the horn?" Kai asked, not because he wanted the job but because the absence of the blast would nag the mind if they let it.

"We'll sound one short on the half," Sophie said. The instinct to look at the clock was there. She put her hand on the heater hose instead. "Warm," she said and didn't soften the way she said it. "We sync it with the line checks. They run on the half."

Liv checked the deck through the hatch and then the forward line again. "We'll go light on deck work until we know the set holds through a few cycles. Rhea, keep eyes on the wedge edge."

"Copy," Rhea said. She didn't stop shaking, but she did rest the pencil against the paper in a way that let her hand sleep without dropping it. The grin had come and gone. The numbers had given her a small piece she could bite and swallow.

Ilya's breath found an even part of the rhythm and rode it for a few turns. He let his hand rest flat against the floor. He could feel the change more clearly that way than through anything they were saying. He spared

a breath to ask, without question in it, "Strut's good?"

"Strut's good," Liv said. "Holds on the fall."

Sophie glanced at her log and then at Liv. "Do you want me to try the call?"

"Not yet," Liv said. "Write the five-second interval. We don't break the room's work to chase a voice that isn't there."

She logged it, added barely next to in band, and left it unlined.

Kai's hands stopped shaking enough that he could hold the mug. He didn't sip. He just held it because the heat came through the ceramic in a way that soothe wasn't the right word for. It made something in his fingers stop feeling like it belonged somewhere else.

Liv ran her hand along the inside of the forward bulkhead base where the long strut landed, felt the full contact, and chose not to adjust. She turned the mugs on the galley shelf until they faced the same way and then stopped touching things. Her hands had to do nothing for a minute to see if the world could stay upright without them pushing on it.

The boat still carried the left tilt, less than before. The old chain box earned its keep again, its weight forward starboard keeping the turn clean. The bilge sat below the lip and quivered without climbing. The board at the seam pressed with a steady face rather than chewing.

"Top of the half," Sophie said when the settle inside her gave her the right measure. She lifted the horn and sent a single short blast out that shook the wheel and the glass. It vanished into the fog the way they were used to now. "No reply," she said. It needed to be said in the same flat way so it wouldn't decide to grow teeth.

The thin tone on the radio stayed where it was. It was just noise. No carrier. Nothing broke through.

On the next higher lift, Sophie and Kai both glanced to the forward corner; Liv heard only quiet there.

Liv listened to the pump and to the canvas and to the room. She put the cut on her hand against clean cloth and let it have the sting. She kept one ear for the forward line's hum that had gone away. If it returned, she would hear it.

Rhea found a shallow doze for a minute with her eyes open. She didn't go anywhere when she did it. The numbers let her stay in the room. The heater's red stayed present on the edge of her vision, the only warm color in the space besides skin.

"You want to seat the second?" Kai asked, not as a challenge, more because he was the hand that would do it if told. "Or let that be our cushion for now?"

Liv leaned over the staged pack and felt the smaller board and the bias strip under it with her fingertips. "We let it be for now. The cloth under the first is holding. We don't risk a pull at the edge we can't see."

"Copy," Kai said. He adjusted the webbing so the free end didn't trail where it could wick up water. He did it with the same presence he had brought to hauling himself back over the rail. It wasn't pride; it was the shape of his focus.

Sophie put a hand lightly on Rhea's wrist and counted without naming it. She took it away when she had what she needed and went back to the lines. One more note in the margin, forward corner quiet, no circle around it.

Liv stood with her hands flat on the table. The ledger lived without a page: litres, calories, minutes. The tarp had bought them of the last. It would cost them of the first. They would spend it because they had to.

The room waited for a noise that meant new trouble. It didn't come in that minute. They took it. They didn't confuse it with safety.

The pump ran. The hose thumped. The heater's red light held. The lines held. It was enough to make a second cup of air in the lungs before they had to count again.

# Chapter 7

## Food Ledger

The sea laid down without warning. It went from a push that made the mugs on the shelf kiss their saucers to a flat that took the voice out of the hull. Liv felt it first at her boots, where the floor stopped asking for balance. The lines quieted. Even the wheel let go of its old quiver and sat with itself. The sudden quiet tightened the skin at her nape. In the hush, breaths matched the pump beat; a knee clicked on the bench; the drip at the edge of the baking tray fell in even intervals.

She checked the forward corner line through the hatch without stepping out. The canvas under the hull kept its seat for the moment. On the lift there was a tremble she didn't like, so small that if she called it the others would have to hear it too. She tracked it with her eyes and let the word stay down. If that quiver lived through three lifts, she'd call for ease and take on the corner.

Inside, the pump kept its work. The note had steadied after the set and held. In the stillness it sounded smaller. The smell in the cabin was not small. Iron and old blood sat warm in the air. Fresh bleach had given up its fight and left a film. Wet wool went on pretending to be dry.

"New numbers," Liv said. She didn't raise her voice. The room didn't need volume. It needed edges. She lifted the measuring cap and set it by the mug that had belonged to Rhea before the collision and now belonged to everyone when the cap moved down the line. "One hundred fifty millilitres. Every eight hours. No exceptions, not even me. Food is four mouthfuls each per cycle. Cold tins only. If you need ibuprofen, you get six mouthfuls, not more."

Sophie's pencil came up and marked the log. She underlined the volume and the interval and wrote Barely next to In band where it already lived. Her mouth stayed flat. She didn't look for eye contact or permission. She didn't offer a noise to soften it.

Ilya lifted his head and let it go back to the bench. His shirt had been grey earlier. It was darker now under his ribs. He didn't ask for water. He watched the measuring cap go to Rhea first because you don't hand new rules to a person with a fever last. His eyes met Liv's and read what was already there. He nodded like she had spoken privately.

Rhea's hands came out of the blanket as if gloves were on them. She took the cap, swallowed without letting it touch her lip, and handed it back. "In band," she said, hoarse. Then, lower, meant for the metal cases more than for the people, "Stay." She watched the red light on the heater, then the small rectangle of window that showed green water when the boat dropped and a dull silver when it rose. The numbers she had drawn on the damp page were a wet map without cities. She kept touching the pencil to them to keep them where they were.

Kai slept near the companionway. It was the worst place to sleep, cold came down the ladder, and anyone needing to go up would step on him, but it was where he had sat and stopped, and his body had chosen not to be clever. His knees were still pulled up under the jacket Liv had zipped on him. His head sat on his shoulder like it had been put there by someone careful who was out of time. Strength had been a made thing all night. Now it was a banked fire they couldn't afford to let go out for the wrong reasons.

Sophie lifted the hand mic and pressed the transmit with her thumb and said the words that had gone into fog since the strike. "Mayday, mayday, mayday. Research vessel Calyptra. Hull breach below the waterline. Five souls aboard. All conscious. Two injured. Position, " She read numbers clean. Static and a thin tone answered, the same as before. She waited until the tone hurt her ear and said it again into the headset in case the hand mic's connection had failed. A wire-hum that never

rounded into a voice met her there too.

“No joy,” Sophie said. She wrote it and left it at that. She took the headset off and laid it flat so the next hand would not tangle itself. Then she sat still and listened to nothing, the kind of listening a person does when she is trying to catch something inside silence and pull it into sound by wanting it enough.

The horn was due on the half. Liv looked at the wall where a clock wasn't. The boat had been the clock all night. She felt the three-beat count appear under her tongue, the way it did when decisions needed to be held on one finger and taken on another. One. Two. Three. She held the count and let it flow toward the pump's downbeat.

She lifted the knife off the galley shelf and held it to the light. She ran her thumb along the spine, checked the edge under the light, and set it down near the stove without ceremony. The kettle, still dry, had waited in the same place for hours and would wait longer. Heat meant fuel. Fuel meant the difference between sterilising and making tea you couldn't drink.

“Sophie,” Liv said.

Sophie didn't look up from the log. “Yes.”

“Check the heater again.”

“Warm,” Sophie said. Her hand had already moved there. She kept it in contact for a breath longer than necessary and counted to herself in the tone she used to square a room. “In band,” she added by habit, and then took the word back with a small shake of her head because it was Rhea's to say.

“In band,” Rhea said, on time. “Barely.”

“Good,” Liv said. She didn't smile. She kept the corner of the word facing down so it wouldn't be mistaken for comfort. She crossed to the hatch, watched the forward line where the boathook had feathered away a hum earlier, and counted a lift and a fall. Quiet there. The boat set down

and held steady. The room let out a breath it hadn't agreed to hold. The smell of iron stayed.

"Top of the half," Sophie said from the log by the radio. She lifted the horn and gave a single short blast. The sound shook the wheel and edged the glass. The fog took it. She listened, then logged the time and left the response line blank. She did not box it. It didn't deserve shapes.

Liv set her palms on the table. The ledgers had stopped living on paper. They were in her skin. Litres. Calories. Minutes. She let the words line up in their order and put them away. "Back to work," she said gently enough that it could be taken as mercy or as insistence. "We keep this state."

The stillness held another two cycles. The pump ran. The hose hit and released without fighting. Sophie set the radio to scan through its dead presets because doing nothing would have been worse. Rhea watched her window and her heater. Liv kept her ear on the forward corner. The quiet made the drip at the edge of the baking tray loud. Sophie moved the tray a finger and set it back, and the drip landed in a fresh spot without that pitch.

Ilya shifted his weight. He did it like a man pulling a thread through his side. He kept breathing shallow and even and showed nothing of the show. "Liv," he said. He moved his hand across the floor to the panel and stopped there. "You'll need to cut something else, not the cloth." He left it and shut his eyes.

She looked at the cloth under her palm at the wedge, then at him. "We'll keep it seated," she said. He heard the second half of the sentence and nodded without opening his eyes.

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Liv checked the brace mark and the forward line, listened for the hose to hit and release, and let the next three pump beats pass. The quiet

pushed people into corners of themselves. It made room for a conversation there had not been room for while the boat was taking up all the minutes. Liv didn't want it more than anyone else did. She could feel it waking up in the space between the pump beats with its one hard word. She kept the pump's three-count steady in her head while they talked.

"Rhea," she said. She waited until Rhea was looking at her and not at the heater or the canisters. "If the fever climbs and we see spreading redness on the thigh, we are going to have to talk about controlling infection by removing the source." She kept the language clinical because anything else would have tried to be kind. "Above the break." She didn't say the other word until it was unavoidable. "Amputation."

The room changed shape. Sophie's hand stopped on the log. The pencil did not put the period. It didn't know where the sentence ended. She turned her head toward the small window at the forward end, like she could call something from it, a change in light or a ship shape in grey. "No," she said. The word was quiet but hard. "We wait. Give it until," She checked a clock that wasn't there. "Until it clears enough to see something on water. There's traffic somewhere. People move along this line." She blinked hard and then softer. "Please, Liv. Time. I'll keep the horn on the half, try the radio each cycle, and stage a flare."

Kai looked at the brace and the board and the forward line. He scratched at salt on the jacket near his neck and kept his eyes away from Rhea. "If that's what it takes," he said. "We do it before it climbs. High above the break, clean tie here. Heat the blade. I'll hold her." He wasn't arguing to win a point. He was trying to put the hard work in the slot where it belonged on the shelf. He didn't reach for the knife with his hand. He reached it with his words.

Rhea didn't glance at him. She held Liv's gaze and held it steady despite the heat in her face and the shake under the blanket. Drawing a slow breath through her nose, she kept it even. A small twitch caught high on her thigh and she masked it by settling the blanket. "Don't make me the thing you cut to make the room simpler." She didn't cry when she said

it. She didn't try to prove she was brave. She put the pencil down and flattened her hand on the damp page, as if that would press the numbers in place. "Keep me warm. Keep me up. Keep it clean."

Ilya moved again and sucked air between his teeth. He turned his head, not the rest of him. "With what?" He didn't spit the question at anyone. He put it on the table because it belonged there. "You have no anaesthetic. No clamp that matters. No cautery you can trust in a wet room. You cut that leg, she dies faster from the cut than from the fever, today." He let the breath drop out of him. "Hold. Keep it clean. Elevate." He closed his mouth before blood could decide to use it.

Sophie took a breath that shook and made herself stop shaking. "We wait until we can flag someone," she said. She folded the page over in the log. The crease lay neat under her fingers. "That's something we can do that isn't cutting. Horn on the half. Flare ready. Radio every cycle." She let go of the window and looked at Liv in a way that said she knew who made the calls and did not intend to take the wheel out of her hands.

Liv stood with one hand on the table and one in the air with nothing in it. She didn't deny any of it. "We wait," she said. "We keep it clean. We don't bounce her. We hold temperature." She placed the knife on the stovetop with the point facing away from anyone. "The word stays on the table," she added. It landed there and sat like a piece of metal you couldn't pretend was something else because of lighting. She set two half-hours on the horn cadence before raising it again.

Rhea put the back of her hand to her mouth and held it there. She breathed a laugh without sound, the kind a person makes when a joke about her own body tries to crawl up and she pushes it back down. "I'm not your spare timber," she said. She found the heater's red with her eyes and kept it in her peripheral vision. "I'm still working."

"You are," Liv said. "You keep calling the band. You tell us if the edge moves." She moved her palm to the seated board where the cloth had stopped sawing after the tarp set. The pencil line on the brace matched its

own shadow. She felt pressure and put the sensation in the line where it belonged in her head. Numbers without solace. Numbers that let her decide.

Sophie lit the stove low. She set the kettle in the pot guard and latched the strap across the handle so it couldn't walk. It cost a minute the pump wouldn't get back. "For the blade," she said, so no one would expect a cup. Drips found the new spot in the tray. The rest of the room listened to the slow rise of water that would not be drunk.

Rhea lifted the blanket so the air under it moved. She didn't lift it far. She had learned in one night not to make a promise to herself that gravity could use to hurt her. "In band," she said softly. Then, because she wanted it to stay the truth, "Barely."

Ilya kept still until his ribs stopped complaining. "Good," he said. It was the same word he had used after the canvas set. He let it mean what it could and nothing more. He had always been careful with words. He was even more so now.

Kai closed his eyes, pressed the heel of his hand against his eyelid for a second, and let it go. "Copy," he said to the room, although there hadn't been an order. He stood and checked the tie-offs without being told. He didn't adjust a thing. Touching them was the point. He kept his hands where they belonged, on what he could hold.

The kettle took its time. It didn't whine yet. It sat and gathered heat the way the room did with air.

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Two half-hours later, the forward corner still held and the pump note stayed even. Condensation had thickened on the cabin liner; the tray's drip landed closer together.

Sophie went to the locker where the flares should have sat and had, once. The sealed case had soaked and dried so many times that the label had worn to a suggestion of letters. She opened the lid and lifted one of the handhelds. The paper at the base felt a little soft. The cap turned with more give than it should have had. She peeled the foil back, pressed it flat with her thumb, then peeled it again. Her thumb paused on the cap before she finished the turn. Her jaw set. She kept her eyes on the flare, not on Liv.

“Don’t set it off in a whiteout,” Liv said without looking up from the brace. She said it the way you call a rule that a child already knows to make sure it stays in the air between you.

“I won’t,” Sophie said. “Not unless I see a reason.” She folded the foil back down slowly, pressed the edges flat with her thumbnail until the seal looked like it could pretend to do its job again, and ran a strip of tape around the fold. She reached behind the radio shelf and tucked the flare there, inside the place where her hand went when a noise made her jump. She could reach it without thinking, which was the only way that kind of object got used in a minute that gave you no time for steps.

She sat down with the log again and put a single dot on the page where the word flare would have gone if she’d been willing to name it in a log that had too much gravity already. She lined the dot out and drew a short line next to it. Her letters came small and square. That was enough. The paper would know what it meant when the same hand came back later.

Kai rolled his shoulders and flexed his fingers. The skin on the back of his hands had turned the clean colour it kept when circulation returned. He looked like he wanted to deny feeling anything about it. He picked up his mug, tested his grip lightly, then set the mug down as if it had always been part of his rhythm and not a test of it. He closed his hand around the starboard line and squeezed once. The line pushed back. He kept his face flat and held the line a second longer.

Rhea had drifted into that part of fever where the mind could do math and not know it was a person doing it. “Nine degrees starboard on the second board,” she whispered, though they had decided not to seat it yet. “Seat on the fall or you pull the cloth. Rosin would work. Wax, no. No wax. Underwater, the bond,” She stopped. Her mouth kept talking inside closed lips. Liv caught the words and let the ones that mattered get to the place where decisions were made. The rest she left to stay behind Rhea’s teeth where they cost the least.

Ilya watched Liv watch the forward corner. “Sit,” he said. The word came out rough and not because there was anything wrong with his throat that hadn’t been there before. It was what a person sounded like when his insides were arguing with his breath. “You’ll hold the brace better if your legs stop shaking.”

Liv didn’t glance down at her legs. “They’re not shaking,” she said, and then took the step sideways that put her shoulder against the bench so the weight went into wood that could carry it. Her hand stayed on the brace where the pencil line met clean wood. The forward corner line laid quiet for a lift, then quivered the next time the boat rose. She didn’t call it. She cleared her throat instead and ran a finger to the edge of the board to feel if anything was starting to walk. It wasn’t.

The kettle took so long that in any other room someone would have looked twice to make sure the flame was still under it. The flame was there. The whistle came late. It wasn’t a proud sound. It was a thin line that cut the room in two. Sophie turned the knob and took the kettle off. She used a dry cloth on the handle and set it back in the guard. She didn’t open it. The steam stayed inside where it would be worth more in a minute when the blade would touch it and become the clean thing it had to be even if it never touched flesh. Tongs and a folded cloth waited on the bench; when they used the steam, hands would stay above the spout and out of its path.

“Top of the half in six,” Sophie said to no one in particular and to the part of herself that wanted to jump early. She checked the heater hose.

“Warm.” She let those four letters sit on the log. They weren’t nestled next to joy but they weren’t without worth. She looked at the window again, not for a ship this time, but for the small change in grey that meant the world was working in its old ways.

Kai picked up the strainer bucket and put it down again. “You want me on anything?”

“Yes,” Liv said. “Breathe the way I said. Two in. One out on the fall. Keep warm without sweat.”

He made a face that was almost not a face. “Copy.” He leaned against the bulkhead and did it. The first cycle felt stupid to him. The next one less so. The third one matched the boat. That was the point.

Rhea watched the heater’s red light like it was a heartbeat she could regulate by attention. “In band,” she said. Then, quieter, to the cases that held the ice, “Mine.” It wasn’t a correction for what anyone had thought. It was possession of work that had taken more of her than she could write down. Work she had carried through places where equipment froze to your hand if you were not careful. Work that held a future she had spent years building, which was not a story in a room but a fact.

Ilya’s fingers spread on the floor near the panel. That had become his way of seeing. He could feel edges through wood better than he could with his eyes in this light, in this fog, in this body that now refused certain kinds of work like it had found a rulebook and decided to enforce it late. He kept still and waited for the boat to tell him anything new. “Forward corner hum?” he asked.

“Quiet,” Liv said. She didn’t put relief in it. The word was the state. She checked the brace again and kept her hand there because nothing else told her more.

Sophie put her hand on the radio and didn’t press the transmit. She had spent enough words for one hour. She let the thin tone come through the speaker and be nobody’s voice. She set the horn on the ledge where it would not slip. She took the flare down from behind the shelf to be sure

her hand could find it without looking and then returned it to the exact same place. She set her jaw and checked the reach again.

Liv counted in her head in threes. One. Two. Three. She matched them to pump cycles because numbers that were only numbers were no use here. She counted another set and heard a small change in the hose at the scupper, a cleaner off, no drag. She put a point on the inside of her cheek with her tongue to mark it for herself. That met her first mark. She moved nothing. She said nothing. She let the boat have this quiet minute without turning it into a story it couldn't keep.

The room took the minute and stayed inside it like you stay under a blanket that isn't warm. Everyone held something, lines, a pencil, a mug, their own lungs. The whistle had cut the air. The next horn would cut it again. The canvas under the hull made its small tremor and then stopped. The knife lay clean on the stovetop with no work done and all of it implied; the handle held a faint warmth. The heater kept the only red light in the room alive. The ledger sat open in Liv's head with one more entry, unlined for now.

"Top," Sophie said softly. She lifted the horn. The blast went out. The fog took it. "No reply," she said. She put the horn down like it was an egg that would break if she wasn't careful. She logged it and boxed nothing.

Liv's hand stayed on the brace. The forward corner held through the next lift. At the window the grey thinned half a shade, and the air pressed different against her ear.

# Chapter 8

## Squall Rupture

The change came in the sound before it reached the skin. The pump's beat held for one more cycle, then the air at the companionway went from flat to crowded. The line at the forward corner vibrated against the jamb in a way it hadn't since they set the canvas. A tight, high noise threaded in and out of the wind's noise. Liv kept her hand on the brace and waited for the next fall. The room felt balanced on a shelf with a hand at one end waiting to tilt it.

The boat rose and the note sharpened. The old canvas under the hull turned from a thing under control to a thing with its own noise. The edge fluttered where the starboard take-up met the forward tie. The tone turned thin and then thin again, faster. The hum drilled against her earbone and then went slack with a rip they all could feel through their feet.

The hose at the scupper dragged instead of snapping clean. The bilge surface wobbled once and then found a new level higher up the lip. Water pressed under the wedge cloth and stacked at the floor seam in a fresher line. The pump's voice dropped half a step and stayed there.

"Hold your stations," Liv said. No panic in it. No other tone would hold the room.

Wind shoved its way down the ladder, and a sheet of cold rode it. The exterior lines that had been quiet since dawn ticked and then thrummed. The forward corner line drew a half-hand in and tried to take the cleat with it. Sophie was already there with both hands on the wraps, getting the line off its chatter without paying it out. Her knuckles went white, then eased as she settled the wraps.

“Starboard ease?” Sophie asked. Her jaw was set the way it had been set when she’d put tape back on the flare cap. She didn’t take her eyes off the cleat.

“No deck,” Liv said. “No one goes out. Ease starboard two fingers only, on the fall. Don’t chase it.”

The boat dropped and Sophie eased the line with two fingers of space and then trapped it again. The hum changed pitch and then came back higher. There was a second sound at the edge of it. Not the hum. The sound of threads letting go.

“It’s peeling,” Kai said. He didn’t swear. He moved past the handhold to the ladder without thinking.

Liv didn’t raise her voice. “Stop.” His foot was on the first rung. Her word pinned it. His heel hovered. He stepped back off the rung and put weight where she wanted it. “You are not going out for it. Pump and strainer. Now.”

He turned his head without taking the other step. His look asked permission to disobey and then took her reading of the room and put his hands where they were told. He took the strainer off its hook and planted himself in the wet floor he already knew. He had set himself in the worst place for warmth earlier. Now he set himself in the worst place for comfort and picked up the work.

Sophie’s hands trembled once. The tremor went away. She kept the line where it was. She kept her body in the “if this goes wrong I am still inside” place. The small window in the forward bulkhead showed no horizon, only a lighter band where grey turned to a paler grey.

The boat lifted. The noise at the forward corner reached exactly the frequency that had meant trouble when the set was new. A breath later the line went weightless for a fraction. Then something heavy on the other side of the hull let go with a sound that was more felt than heard. The old canvas did not belong to them anymore.

The cabin tilted sharp to port. Rhea gripped the edge of the bench and clenched her teeth against the yell her body tried to make, and made it anyway. She edged her splinted leg a finger-width and took two short nose breaths. It came out of her without language, a brief crack that hit the room at the same time as the wheel's quick quiver.

Liv's palm registered a shift under the brace. The pencil mark she had drawn two hours ago moved half a millimetre. Then another half on the next lift. That was the start of a walk.

"Quarter-turn," she said. She didn't take her hand off the wood. "On the fall. Kai, strainer first. Keep the intake clear."

Kai's mouth opened and closed once. He didn't waste a sentence on it. He went to his knees, dipped the strainer, swept a handful of hair and cloth grit from the mesh, slammed the cap back down, and handed the intake back to the pump with a set of hands that had stopped shaking in the night because they had run out of shaking.

The pump took the water and threw it into the hose. The hose hit the scupper and didn't come off. It rode there and dragged. The boat reached the top of the lift and the wood under Liv's hand asked to give.

"Now," she said. She put the weight of her arm into the brace and gave the bolt a quarter-turn with the wrench already staged there. The creak in the wood changed. The pencil line held for that fall and the next. The boat coasted down and met its own water harder than before.

Wind shouldered against their thin wall. Water hissed low on the other side of the seam where the canvas had been doing its share. That hiss was a different shape now. The sound mapped to volume. It did not care.

Sophie's hand had gone behind the radio shelf in the same motion that had taken her to the cleat. She touched the flare's taped cap, felt the give in the paper at the base, and pulled her hand back like the object had teeth. The look she shot Liv was not a request. It was a warning that she knew what her hands wanted and knew better.

“Not in this,” Liv said. “Put it down.”

Sophie’s hand came back empty. She set the log steady under the baking tray and forced her fingers to write one line: Canvas peeled. Pump note lower. No exterior.

Rhea made herself breathe through her nose as the heel stayed past level and then came back partway. She had both hands flat on the damp paper where her numbers lived.

“In band,” she said to the heater that had not moved and did not know there was wind. Her voice was thin. “Barely.”

“Good,” Liv said. The word had no extra on it. She pressed the board on the fall with her palm, felt the cloth answer her through the wood with a steady, new resistance. The hiss at the seam laid thicker than it had. The board sang for a breath and then the song stopped.

The boat gave a small shudder that had nothing to do with any of their hands. Something outside to starboard slapped, then went silent. The line at the cleat went slack by a hand’s width. The starboard take-up no longer worked on anything under the hull.

“Let it go,” Liv said. “Slack it. Don’t fight a dead line.”

Sophie bled the wraps down and laid the loose neatly. She coiled it by habit so no one would trip on it in five minutes.

The bilge level found the lip again after three cycles of pump and bucket. It didn’t stay below it. It kissed it and then climbed a finger’s breadth over. Water made its own handhold on the edge of the opening and tried to pull itself up for a look.

Kai hit the strainer again without being told. His fingers worked quick and careful. His breath stayed in the two-in, one-out pattern Liv had set in the last calm. He made the air in his body match the boat’s move. That was how you stayed inside your skin when the room wanted you out of it.

“Port-side hatch stays shut,” Liv said, not because anyone was moving toward it, but because rules that were not said had a way of dissolving when the air changed. “Aft stays at half. On my word only.”

“Copy,” Sophie said. She wrote the rule again in the margin and underlined the word only.

Wind pressed in and then stepped away and then pressed in again with more weight behind it. The calm that had felt wrong an hour ago was gone. The canvas they had spent their cold on was part of the water now. Everyone in the cabin knew it.

A fresh wet tick formed at the cloth edge under the board. It fattened, slid along the seam, and broke away in a string. The next one came sooner. The pump caught it in the same rhythm as before and threw it overboard with the rest, but the tone it made while doing it said it had to try harder now to make the same thing happen.

“We’re losing what the cloth was buying,” Ilya said. It came out of him from the floor with the same flatness as his other useful sentences. He had been quiet since the first rip. He had turned onto the side that didn’t hurt as much and kept one hand on the panel. His palm felt the boat’s linear truth better than his eyes could see it.

“I know,” Liv said. “We do not chase cloth.”

Kai didn’t look up from the strainer. “Copy.” He set the intake, ran the bucket once for the line, and shoved his shoulder against the bulkhead to put different muscles in play than the ones that had failed him by the rail earlier.

Rhea swallowed. She had been steady while they built the wedge hours ago. Fever made steadiness into a thing that cost now.

“Outlet interval,” Liv said.

Rhea counted with the pump. She hated that she had to close her eyes to hear the gap. When she opened them she saw the numbers on the damp page and didn’t like that they were hers.

“Three,” she said. She blinked. “And a catch.”

That was down from what they had held. Liv didn’t comment. She moved the wrench the smallest distance and held the brace on the fall again. She thought about seating the second pack. She pictured the longer tear Rhea had described at a different angle. She pictured the cloth under it pulling and lifting and making a smaller hole into a bigger one at a speed no one’s hands could match.

“Not now,” she said to the wall that wanted her to do something with a tool that would show anyone watching that she was in control. She refused the show in favor of the thing that worked.

Sophie had one palm on the radio. Static and the thin tone stayed steady there the way mildew stayed steady in corners that got light only on Tuesdays. She left it alone. She logged next half in five minutes, then crossed it out when the wind swallowed the idea of a horn.

Liv touched the brace and the board and the cloth through the board. The vibration there was not friendly. She kept her palm against it because if she took it off the wood would find its own idea of where to be.

“Kai,” she said.

“Here.”

“We’re buying minutes again, not hours.”

“Then we spend them right,” he said.

“Yes,” Liv said. She didn’t look at him. “Exactly.”

The squall’s main push rolled through them and started to go. It didn’t leave them in the shape it had found them. The board had stopped singing. The pencil line had moved and then stayed. The pump had more work to do than it had had half an hour ago. The old calm had come before this push.

Sophie rubbed a wet patch off the log with her sleeve and made a box around a pair of words she would want to see fast if her head turned to

soup later: No exterior.

The next fall was cleaner. The one after that wasn't. Liv didn't trust any small improvement with this wind.

"We hold here," she said. She didn't say for how long. She didn't have that.

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Three lifts came and went before anyone spoke. Ilya lay with his eyes closed and one hand on the panel. Lids lifted. An elbow slid under him, bringing his head up. He kept his mouth closed until the next breath got there. The pump held at three with a catch; the slack starboard line lay coiled on the sole. Sophie's pencil hovered over the log and touched down a fraction late. Liv matched her breath to the motor and kept her hand where it was on the brace.

"I can tell you how to make it stop," he said.

The room stilled a fraction. Even the wind let that line in.

Liv kept her hand where it was. "Tell me."

He waited for the boat to hit the bottom of the next fall and ride the next rise. He used the gap so his words wouldn't get shredded.

"Rigid plate. Interior. Not wood. Not cloth." The short phrases cost less air. "Frame. Backer. Gasket. Studs." He closed his eyes on the last word and opened them again. "Seat from inside the flood." He eased his palm flatter on the panel. "Only from inside."

Liv didn't look at the aft hatch. The words made the shape all by themselves.

"From what parts," she said.

It took him a breath.

“Desal unit,” he said. The word hit the table with weight. “Takes the face. Bracket for studs. Pump mount gives you steel. Gasket from its door, still pliant. Bolts. Nuts. The bin has the rest.”

Sophie’s pencil stopped. She did not write desal out. Her mouth went a different shape.

Kai’s eyes moved from the aft hatch to the pump and back. “Drowning is quicker,” he said. He didn’t pitch it against anyone.

Sophie looked at Liv and not at Kai.

“How many days on what we have if we break it,” she asked. Her voice stayed level by force. “At one-fifty every eight. Less if we increase in fever.”

Liv didn’t answer. Not yet. She wasn’t choosing thirst when the floor was wet. She wasn’t allowed to pick future pain over present breath. She knew that. Knowing didn’t make the numbers smaller in her head.

Rhea drew a quick line on her page with the side of the pencil because the point had gone to mush. The page bled it into a grey that looked like someone had dragged a thumbprint through it. She had turned a lot of data into helps and harms in the last years. She had not done it with her own leg on a bench.

“Does the maths say we do it,” she asked Ilya. “Not the feeling. The pressure. The shape of the tear. The state of the cloth.”

Ilya looked at the underside of the table because that was where the boat’s truth was when you couldn’t see the water.

He nodded once. He didn’t do anything with his face afterward. He let gravity put his head back down because he couldn’t afford the cost of choosing to do it.

Sophie closed her eyes for half a second and then opened them in the new room they were living in. She looked at the heater hose and put a hand on it as if heat could travel up her skin and settle her. The hose felt the same.

Faces turned toward Liv. The pump kept time. She took the looks and didn't look away.

She didn't move. She didn't take her hand off the brace. She said nothing. The pump ran. The hose dragged and then came clean and then dragged again. The heater kept giving up that tired rubber smell that had lived in boats since boats had hoses.

The boat hit the next lift and it was wrong by one small thing that only someone who had been feeling it for hours would have heard. She tracked it. She spoke when she could trust her voice.

"We don't have the order yet," she said. "We have the plan."

Kai's jaw made a small jump that he closed. Sophie's shoulders dropped and then shot back up because that wasn't relief. Rhea rolled her pencil one turn so the last dry edge of the lead would leave a mark the boat would recognize later when it came back through the numbers to check if it had lied.

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The wind eased and then came back. Steadier for a breath, not relief. They kept counting.

Kai shifted off his heels and stood. He didn't bother to hide the energy that had nowhere to go and not enough places to land. He could put it into the pump, the bucket, the strainer, the brace, the line at the cleat that had no job anymore. None of those jobs were the one in his head.

"Give the order," he said. He didn't make it cruel. He made it simple. "I'm ready."

Sophie's head snapped toward him with a look that would have been a slap in any other room.

“You’re ready to take apart the one thing that gives us water,” she said. “And then what on the second day. And the third.” Her hand went to the measuring cap and stayed there without picking it up. “At one-fifty. Every eight. Not more. With a fever in this room. With two injured.” She wasn’t pleading on her own account. She was pleading for the version of them that would still be here after the decision.

“There won’t be a third day in this state,” Kai said.

“There might,” Sophie said, and then made herself stop because she heard how that sounded. “If we keep it from being today.”

Rhea let her eyes move from one to the other and then land on Liv. She had liked Liv very much when the world had been a schedule and a list and a crate that needed to be strapped one more way to satisfy a person who needed that. She liked her now with a different muscle. It had nothing to do with liking and everything to do with surviving with a spine.

“The ledger doesn’t take wishes,” she said. Her voice didn’t come out loud. It came out straight. “Litres. Calories. Minutes. The shape of the hull. The pump. The size of the tear. The state of the cloth. The angle. Your hand on the brace. Not what any of us wants to be true.”

Liv took one breath and learned what it felt like to do it with a sentence that would not be taken back sitting inside it.

“No donor forced speed,” she said. She didn’t let it sit behind anyone’s shoulder. “That was on me. I wanted the outside line. I wanted the window. I said the word and you all moved when I said it.”

No one answered. Sophie’s pencil paused and landed a fraction late. Kai’s jaw worked; he looked at the pump, not at her.

Ilya closed his eyes. He didn’t change his face or the line of his mouth. He had already told her before they cast off what he thought of the kit staying on the dock. He hadn’t been the one with the wheel then or now.

Kai’s throat moved. He let the words about the epoxy die before they reached his mouth.

Liv shifted her other hand to the table and laid it flat there so she wouldn't pick up the knife and turn the room into something else by accident. The blade lay on the stovetop a hand's breadth away, clean, warm from the kettle they had brought to a whistle for reasons everyone in the room knew.

"I will decide for breath now," she said. She looked at Sophie when she said it and at Kai when she finished it. "I will carry the rest. I'm not dressing it up. Not this. Not anymore."

No one spoke. The pump spoke for all of them. The hose hit the scupper with a thump and came off clean for once. Everyone heard that. It didn't mean anything by itself. They didn't let it.

"We stage the option," she said. "We do not execute it until I say. Sophie, log the parts. Don't write the word *desal* if you don't want it on the page. Draw a square and write door, bracket, studs. Rhea, you tell me if the outlet interval drops below what you just called. You tell me if it goes to two and a catch. You don't sugar it. Kai, get the bin with bolts and any spare bracket hardware. Don't unbolt anything that runs this pump. Bring it near. Don't strip it. Put it within reach. Ilya," She paused. He had his eyes open again. ", You tell me what holes we'll drill and where they land if we have to seat from inside. You say the word 'inside' again and I will take it. But not yet."

"Inside," he said, because precision mattered. He didn't add anything. He didn't need to.

"Port hatch stays shut," Liv said again, not because anyone had drifted, but because repetition was a kind of reinforcement that wood and people both understood. "Aft stays at half. On my word. Not a finger more."

Sophie put the log on her knees to keep it dry and drew a box. She wrote: door. bracket. studs. She didn't write *desal* anywhere. She didn't have to to make the truth be true. She underlined only. She underlined inside.

The boat lifted. The board under Liv's hand pushed back steady and then rattled a hairsbreadth. The pencil line stayed where it had moved to and did not walk again on that lift.

Kai moved under the bench and brought out the bin with bolts and short sections of threaded rod. He set it under the table by the aft hatch and didn't let the metal rattle. He set two wrenches on the table edge within reach of the hand that was not on the brace. He stayed within reach of the strainer. He set a spare bracket on the sole by his knee and did not touch the bolts that meant the difference between water leaving and water staying until a voice told him to move them.

Rhea's pencil did not feel like a pencil anymore. It felt like cardboard that remembered being a pencil. She used the side of it and made a mark that was not so much a number as a decision to keep a number from dissolving.

"Three," she said again. "No catch." She exhaled a small amount of air that sounded almost like a laugh and was not happiness. "For now."

Sophie lifted the horn by its shoulder and looked at the window. The window gave her nothing back. She set the horn back down and didn't press it. It wasn't the top of anything. It was the middle of something that didn't care for their half-hours.

Liv let the count in her mouth do what it did when she needed to know the difference between a surge and a trend. One. Two. Three. The pump hit its mark at the right places for three more cycles. She let that be what it was. She did not let it be a story about how the boat had forgiven them for anything.

The kettle handle was cool again. The blade on the stovetop sat where she had put it. No one looked at it because not looking at it saved a different amount of air than looking.

"You said studs," she said to Ilya.

“From the pump bracket,” he said. He kept his eyes closed to keep the room small. “Through the plate. Backer ring beyond the tear’s perimeter, inside the compartment. Gasket between. Nuts inside. Washers. Seat it on the fall. You know that.”

“We are not doing exterior work,” she said.

“I didn’t say exterior,” he said. His tone stayed flat; he meant inside the flooded compartment.

Kai made a small sound when he stood. His body told on him with a joint he had ground down on the hull earlier. He ignored it.

“We’ll need a backer,” he said.

“A spare bunk slat,” Ilya said.

“We’re not cutting the table if we can get better,” Liv said. She looked at the bin and the bracket. “We’ll see what the door gives us.” She turned her head a degree. “The door,” she repeated, because words needed to be rubbed against reality a few times in rooms where nothing could be replaced.

“Door,” Sophie wrote in the box again. She made a second box and wrote inside. She drew an arrow between them. She didn’t add an hour or a minute. She didn’t have one to add.

Wind hit the mast in two separate strikes that traveled down into the hull and into their bones. The pump threw water until the motor changed pitch for a second and then came back.

Rhea adjusted the blanket with her elbow so she didn’t have to bend anywhere that would make the bones talk. She got an inch more fabric on her shoulder and pretended it was an improvement.

“In band,” she said. The words came automatically now and still mattered. “Barely.”

“Good,” Liv said. “You tell me when it isn’t. Not a minute late.”

“Copy,” Rhea said. She sounded like someone else for the amount of that one word and then sounded like herself again.

Sophie set her hand on the radio again. She did not transmit. The thin tone held steady under her palm. It was just there, the way the smell of iron had been there since the crate had turned a human leg into a problem no one had a tool for.

“No joy,” she said to herself out of habit, and then did not write it because she hadn’t called. She wrote no call in small letters and boxed it so that future her wouldn’t accuse past her of giving up.

Liv rolled her shoulders once without moving her hand. She felt her spine settle into a different agreement with the bench. She was not going to be able to hold this brace forever. Someone else could put a hand here when she had to move. She would tell them exactly how.

“Kai,” she said.

“Here.”

“If I come off this brace, your hand goes exactly where mine is. You count breaths with the pump and you press on the fall and you ease by only what you can put back. You don’t adjust for the sake of adjusting. You name what you do so that Sophie can write it.

“Copy,” he said. The word was the same every time and also different because it was carrying different weights by the hour.

She didn’t move yet. The pump had bought them one more minute than the minute before. She used it.

“Sophie,” she said.

“Yes.”

“The flare stays where you put it. We are not white. We are not anything anyone can read. It stays there until I say. Not before.

“Yes,” Sophie said. She put her hand behind the shelf again and touched the taped cap for the permission to let it be. She took her hand

back and put it on the log where it belonged until the log belonged somewhere else.

“Ilya,” Liv said.

He made a sound that meant he could hear her and wanted to.

“You keep your hand where you can read the boat for me. If I ask for angle, you give it in words I can match to something I can move.

“Yes,” he said. The syllable had a ragged edge.

She looked at Rhea last because Rhea would try to give the room more than the room deserved from her and because naming that would turn into a fight if she did it wrong.

“You are still working,” she said quietly.

“Yes,” Rhea said. She was not someone with an injured leg in that second. She was a person holding up a corner of the frame with a pencil.

The pump tone dipped and came back. They all let it. They did not give it a meaning it didn’t deserve.

The next lift slammed harder than the one before it. The wedge pushed back harder when it came down. The pencil line didn’t move.

Liv let out a breath that had been waiting for her ribs to get out of the way. The breath wasn’t relief. It was oxygen moving where it was supposed to move.

“We hold,” she said. “We stage. We don’t execute. Not yet.

Kai nodded. He made himself stay at the pump and not the hatch. Sophie’s mouth thinned and then softened. Rhea closed her eyes and opened them and did not give away how much that cost.

Ilya swallowed against something that had nothing to do with thirst.

“Breath now,” Liv said again, to herself and the room and to whatever part of the boat was listening. She kept her palm against the brace and felt the room accept the words and not forgive a single thing.

The next three cycles landed where she needed them. The bucket went up and came down. The hose hit the scupper and then came clean. Wind pressed and eased. They stayed exactly on the line that was not enough and had to be.

Sophie wrote one more sentence so that later, if later arrived, she would see the moment for what it was: Staged parts within reach. Order not given. Breath now.

She underlined now and didn't draw a second line under it because there was only the one.

The boat moved under them, and no one in the room mistook it for anything but movement.

# Chapter 9

## Sacrifice Debate

The pump held its three-beat in a way that pretended at steadiness and then dipped with a drag that pulled at the hose before it came clean. Liv kept her palm on the brace and let the load run through wood and bolt threads into her bones. The air down the ladder stayed crowded and cold. The aft hatch lines were damp under a thin sheen from the last lift, and Sophie's boxed words on the log made a neat field of ink that told time better than the dead radio.

Sophie lifted the horn and set it back without sounding it. There was no top of anything anymore. The thin tone under the radio's static remained where it had lived since before dawn. The forward corner line stayed slack in its coil under the companionway because it had no job now.

"Outlet interval," Liv said.

Rhea shut her eyes with the care of someone guarding a broken part and counted with her mouth until the next bucket splashed. "Three," she said. "No catch." The second word cost her. She pushed air out of her nose and back in so her throat wouldn't give her away.

"In band?" Liv asked without turning her head.

"In band," Rhea answered. She added the one word that lived there now. "Barely."

The boat rose and fell as it had been doing all day. The wedge took the fall and pushed back. Liv kept her weight where it belonged and let the brace feed her the small grating sound that meant it was still engaged. Sophie shifted her knees on the wet floor to keep the page dry and circled

Barely once.

"We need to wait," Sophie said. She kept her voice even. "We keep the unit. We hold the numbers. Someone will pass. The horn on the half. The flare if we can see enough grey to hurt someone's eyes. Thirst takes longer than this. We can meet thirst."

Kai's breath sat in the pattern she had given him earlier, two in, one out on the fall, and paired with the motor. He kept his hands on the strainer because that was the one thing in the room that returned a clean answer every time you did it right.

"Thirst takes days we don't have," he said, not angry. "We're losing it now. Minutes. The hose drags every other lift. You can hear it. The board walked earlier. It will walk again. That's time we don't own."

Sophie didn't look at him. She watched the aft hatch lines where they ran to the cleat and the lower eye. She checked the wraps by eye without touching them. "Two days at one-fifty every eight with the fever like it is," she said. "Three if we drop to a hundred. Four if no one takes ibuprofen. We can do that."

"No one has come," Kai said. He dipped the strainer, cleared a clot of hair and cloth threads, and set it back in the intake with the neat confidence he had when a move had a right and wrong answer.

Liv did not ask for anyone's feelings. She let them talk. The words mattered less than the way the room changed to hold them. The pump worked harder to return the same sound. The hose at the scupper hit and took a beat longer to come back.

Rhea opened her eyes so she could look at Ilya. He lay on his less-awful side with one hand spread flat on the panel. He watched the far edge of the bench to keep his neck in one position. His shirt had dried in places and then gone dark again along the ribs.

"Ilya," Rhea said. "Numbers. What does the plate buy. How much. Not a feeling."

He took a breath as the boat set down, and he used the flat of his hand against the panel to measure the engine that wasn't running and the water that was. "Outlet interval goes to four," he said. He waited for the next fall. "Four and a breath. Maybe five if the gasket seats clean." He closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to spend anything extra on his face. "Leak cut in half if you hit the perimeter. Two thirds if the backer lands past the long tear. It takes pressure." He coughed into his sleeve and turned the cloth over while no one made a noise about it.

Sophie slid the log back onto her knee a shade faster. "We can't drink gasket," she said. "And if we break the unit now and nothing comes until tomorrow, " She left it there and fixed her eyes on the page.

Liv looked at her hand against the brace so she wouldn't look at anyone's face. The skin around the cut across her palm had sealed badly and reopened in small points where the wood rubbed. Blood had turned to dark stripes and then gotten washed lighter with each new wet on the floor. "Say the costs out loud," she said. "We're not letting them live under the table."

Sophie's eyes flicked up to her. She didn't like it and she did it anyway. "Keep the unit, we can keep ration numbers and not throw a flare into a white room. If someone comes late, we have mouths that can swallow. If no one comes, thirst does what thirst does, and it takes longer to finish."

"Break the unit and build the plate," Kai said, taking the other half of the ledger without being asked, "we might get five at the outlet and keep the lip under. We don't die now. We lose water while we keep breath." He wiped his hand on his trousers without looking down and brought another bucket up, his shoulders rolling to put different muscles on the handle.

Rhea drew the side of the pencil through the damp the way she had been doing since the point went to mush. "Plate buys minutes that stack into hours," she said, watching the numbers she had made go soft at the

edges. "But the unit is water we can't make again."

Liv let their sentences sit where they had put them. She kept her own voice level. "Keep the unit and we gamble that the wedge doesn't walk more and the board doesn't lift when the next bad lift comes. We gamble that slow death beats fast. Break the unit and we trade tomorrow's water for today's breath. The heater stays on either way. We do not turn that off."

No one argued with the last line. They had a single job besides not drowning and everyone had signed it.

The pump hit the scupper and didn't come off clean. It dragged the whole length of the outlet before it threw the water. The sound cut through the room.

No one spoke. The wheel made a small twitch and stilled. Somewhere inside the cabin structure, a board settled with a short, decisive crack that had nothing to do with anyone's wishes.

Liv said, "We take the unit. Strip the face for the plate."

The hose at the scupper reached the end of its run and snapped loose. The brace under her palm gave a low groan and held. The air by the galley shelf was cooler; the unit carried a dull rubber smell under the salt now that they were on it.

She didn't say please. She didn't say sorry. She took her hand off the brace and the board stayed where she had left it. That counted for the second it counted.

"Kai," she said. "Door off. Face out. Bring the bracket and the pump mount steel. We need the door gasket intact. Strip the face for the plate. Sophie, you'll log parts without writing the word that tells the whole story. You will draw the boxes you need. Rhea, you are calling dimensions and seat. Ilya, you keep your hand where it teaches me what the boat is doing. Give me numbers if they change."

Sophie slid the log into the crook of her knee and drew a square. Inside it she lettered what they needed and left out the word that told the whole story. She made another small box for the gasket. She put the pencil down and then picked it up again because she was not done yet.

Kai knelt under the galley shelf where the unit sat. He found the hinges for the service door by touch. The screws had lived with salt for too long and didn't want to belong to them anymore. He leaned his weight into the driver, his forearm braced against the lower shelf, and turned until the first one moved and a crack tightened her ribs.

Sophie closed her eyes once. Then she was there at Kai's elbow, hand out. He passed her each screw and she set them in a mug and then decided that was stupid because someone would drink from it later, so she put them in the shallow tin that had had sugar paste in it until the bilge had eaten the rest. She held the door as he freed the last screw so the weight wouldn't tear a hinge.

"Edge is thirty-eight by sixty-one," Rhea said from the bench without looking. She had reduced the world to numbers so she could manage it. "The face flange is two. We need twenty millimeters past the long tear at least. If the bracket holes don't match where we set studs, we cut the bracket and use rod from the bin. Gasket overlap, no less than twenty-five, if the pliancy holds." She swallowed the small sound in her throat when her leg shifted. "Check the pliancy before you cut."

Kai ran his thumb along the dark gasket in the door. It compressed and remembered its shape, slow but present. It smelled of old rubber and salt. "Still gives," he said.

"Good," Ilya said. He pointed with two fingers that shook once and then steadied. "Studs through the face. Backer beyond the tear perimeter inside the compartment. Washers first, then nuts inside. Seat on the fall. You know that."

"We are not doing exterior," Liv said, flat. "Inside only."

"I didn't say exterior," he said. The breath cost him more than the words had.

The face panel swung clear. The unit looked smaller without its skin and more complicated. Kai set the face on the table and Liv put a hand flat on it as if to keep it from deciding for itself what it wanted to be. The metal was cold and already wet on the corners from the room. It numbed her palm.

Sophie reached for a short piece of threaded rod from the bin and then two more. She rested the pencil on the ration box.

Liv didn't let anything change on her face. "Numbers stay at one-fifty every eight. No exceptions. No adjustments for today. We revisit after we seat the plate. The stove remains for the blade only. No tea. Heater stays."

Sophie nodded once and wrote it without turning the log so anyone could read over her shoulder. She boxed the sentence and drew nothing theatrical around it to keep from lying to herself about how much it did.

Kai found the pump-mount steel and worked the bolts that held it. They squealed under the wrench and then moved. He put his knee against the cabinet and pulled so the metal would come clean without tearing. He handed the mount to Liv. It was narrow and stiff enough to keep shape under pressure.

"Backer wants full ring if we can get it," Ilya said, watching the plate the way you watched a patient when you wanted to see if they would keep breathing. "If not, the bunk slat cut wide. Longer side toward the keel."

"The door," Liv said. "We'll see what it gives. I don't cut the table. Not unless everything else stops making sense."

Sophie made another box. foam-backed ring from the door. She underlined the word and then put the pencil between her teeth because her hands were busy passing the gasket when Rhea said, "Now."

Rhea's fingertips found the edge of the gasket and she guided where to cut. "Don't make a corner that wants to split," she said. "Round every

angle. If the rubber keeps memory, we don't force it out of shape where the studs land." She watched the page and kept her breath even.

Liv took the galley knife off the stovetop and ran it under the steam from the kettle. The handle stayed cool now. The blade had been warmed earlier and cleaned. She didn't think the word that went with it. She didn't have to now. She cut the gasket in one smooth arc, careful to angle the cut so it would sit tighter when compressed. It was a small piece of control she could own without borrowing from hope.

Kai held the face plate against the table edge and marked with a pencil where studs would find the bracket and the backer ring beyond the tear. He set the short threaded rods in place to check spacing. "Two fingers between these two," he said, looking to Ilya.

"Three," Ilya said. He didn't explain. He didn't have to. He had already explained the only things that mattered and he had only so many explanations left.

Sophie passed the manual drill from the tool roll laid under the bench. It belonged to the boat the way old tools do, part rust, part handle smooth with use. "Here," she said, simple. "Slow. Straight."

Kai braced the plate and turned the drill with patient force until the first hole took. The metal gave a dust with an iron tang he couldn't pick out over the salt. He kept turning. When the bit caught and jumped, he steadied without swearing because swearing spent air and didn't fix anything. He lined up the second hole by eye, corrected a degree, and drilled again.

"Allowance eight on the gasket between studs," Rhea said, not loud. "It will creep under load. The more pressure you keep on the fall, the less it creeps, but it still will. The backer ring will carry the rest."

Sophie's mouth went tight and she nodded for herself. She held the plate when Kai asked without being asked. Her forearms shook while each turn took another minute they couldn't spare.

"Port stays shut; aft at half. On my word," Liv said, because rules were the only way to keep a room from slipping sideways when the air changed again.

"Copy," Sophie said. She boxed the line in the log and underlined only.

Kai set the studs through the holes he'd made and stacked washers in a neat habit that said he'd done this in different rooms with different reasons. He didn't look up when he spoke. "We're going to take it apart and put it together four times in our heads before we go near the hatch," he said. "Nothing touches water until we can do it without thinking."

Liv laid the gasket on the plate. It lay clean. The door backer, old foam wrapped with a thin sheet from the unit, gave them a ring that would not be perfect and had to be enough. She pressed it into contact and felt the rubber hold shape against the metal rather than fighting it.

"Outlet," she said.

Rhea counted. "Three," she said. "And the catch is back."

Liv looked at the plate and said the sentence that had been sitting in the room since she gave the order. "There is no backup now."

Sophie's inhale came sharp and then quieted. Kai didn't move differently. Ilya looked at the table and not at her because the boat could accept that sentence and so could he, and he didn't need to make her carry his face too.

They put the plate where they could reach it from the aft hatch without dropping it. They set the studs and the washer stacks in shallow tins that wouldn't tip if the boat decided to throw a new angle into the room. Sophie moved the baking tray two finger widths to catch a new drip that had started at the seam in the cabin liner. The air by the unit held the same dull rubber note.

"Warm?" Liv asked, without looking at the heater hose.

"Warm," Sophie said. Rhea glanced at the thermometer port and gave a small nod.

The next lift came harder, and the brace pushed back under Liv's palm with a different tone that went low then steadied. She gave the bolt a quarter turn and the small noise stopped. The pencil line she had made on the brace earlier stayed where it had decided to live for now.

"Inside only," Ilya said. He didn't try to get up. "Seat on the fall." He paused for the boat to give him a space. "Someone goes in. There's no way to put it from here."

Liv looked at the hatch and then kept looking at the plate so no one would think this was coming out of a part of her that could be argued with. "I'll go," she said.

"No," Kai said. He set the drill down where it wouldn't roll and met her eyes in a way he didn't do unless the room needed it. "You stay at the hatch. Your voice to call the fall and make it stick. Your hand on the brace when it shifts. And you're the one who says 'on my word only' and makes it true."

Sophie started to say his name and stopped. She had the arguments but they were made out of wanting and she couldn't spend the room's breath on wanting. She looked at Liv instead and waited for the thing she didn't want to hear that also had to be said.

Rhea had been watching Kai since before dawn. She tracked him each time the bucket came up or the strainer went back in. "He's the strongest," she said. There was no contest in it. "He is." Her fingers tightened on the blanket seam.

Liv opened her mouth to forbid it. The order felt ready in her throat with all the other orders she had given that had kept them and hurt them. Then her eyes landed on his hands. The cuts across the knuckles, the way his grip didn't falter when the tool bit jumped, the steadiness that didn't come from youth so much as from not wasting effort he didn't have to waste. She closed her mouth again and nodded once. It wasn't

permission. It was the only acknowledgment she could give and still be who she had to be for the next hour.

"You will listen," she said to him, not soft. "And you will say what you need and I will do it exactly. On my word. No one else speaks unless I ask them to."

"Copy," he said, and for once the word didn't flatten anything. It made a shape in the room that everyone could stand around without knocking it over.

Ilya moved his hand on the panel a centimeter and then set it down again. "Backer goes beyond the long edge," he said. "If you feel it want to peel, you push into it on the fall and you don't chase the lift." His voice said patient and tired in the same note. "If it whistles, you're not on the gasket. Move a hair. Seat again."

Sophie lifted the log so she wouldn't get water on the page and wrote small where she would find it fast. seat. fall. whistle: re-seat. only. She underlined only.

Kai looked at each of them so that none of them could say later they hadn't heard him. "When I'm in the room," he said, "you don't open for anything I say unless it's the word we pick now."

Liv set her palm on the hatch slide without moving it. "Say the word," she said.

"Shut," he said. "If I say 'shut' you lock it and you keep it that way until I say 'set.' Nothing I do between those two words opens it." He didn't look away from her when he said it. "If you hear anything you don't like, you do not move unless I say 'open.' You do not try to fix the sound with your hands."

Sophie's pencil hesitated for the space of a breath. She didn't like writing words that could end a person. She wrote them anyway. shut. set. open: on command only.

Rhea watched the hatch line and then the plate. "Seat on the fall," she said, because it helped to say the only physics in the room that was still fair. "If you miss one, you don't chase it. You wait. That's the thing that matters."

"I know," Kai said. He nodded once. "If the studs don't find at the angle we think, you take the aft hatch up or down a finger. That's yours," he said to Liv. "No one else touches it."

"On my word only," she said. She had said it so many times that it almost felt like a superstition. It wasn't. It was the only thing between their plan and chaos.

"Outlet," Liv said, because she needed numbers to remind her that this was about water and not about anything else.

Rhea counted, eyes closed. "Three," she said. "And a catch."

Sophie put her hand on the radio again and didn't press the mic. Her fingers found the taped flare cap and then left it where it lived behind the shelf. She did not reach for the horn. There was no top of the half from where she was sitting. There was only the next fall.

Liv moved her palm off the hatch and put it back on the brace. The wood told her the same story as before with one new line that ran lower than she wanted. The pencil mark still held. The wedge didn't sing. The hose at the scupper dragged and then came clean.

"We stage exactly this," she said. "We do not execute until I say. We will not waste the plate by thinking we are ready because we like the feeling of being ready." She looked at Sophie. "Log this sentence. Word for word."

Sophie wrote: staged. not executed. She put a box around it and a small cross in the upper right corner so she could find it when the page went smeared with water or bilge water.

Kai rolled his shoulders once, the old work-start habit. "I'm ready," he said, and then he didn't move toward the hatch because he had just

agreed not to until she told him to.

"Warm," Sophie said again, unprompted. She kept her eyes on the hose.

The blanket twitched as Rhea pulled the good edge up over her shoulder without moving her leg.

Ilya's breath came in a careful even draw and let go again. "Inside," he said softly, because the room had a way of erasing precision when voices got high. "Only inside." He swallowed and let that be enough.

Liv swept the room with the look she saved for the moment before a thing became something you couldn't undo. "Port hatch stays shut," she said. "Aft stays at half. On my word only. No one says the word we are not writing in that book." She pressed her palm to the brace as the boat met its water harder and took the press without moving under her hand.

The pump hit the scupper and came off clean once. No one gave it a meaning it didn't own. The air sat heavy in the throat. The hatch slide under Liv's fingers stayed where it was because she kept it there. There would be a time to move it. It wasn't now.

They held the room in the shape they had made it and let the next three cycles land where they were supposed to. The plate sat by the aft hatch, edges cold through the damp rag under it.

# Chapter 10

## Last Patch

The plate lay on a damp rag where the table met the hatch coaming. It was cut from the desal unit, a cold square with a line of studs poking through. Liv steadied it with a palm when the boat rolled. The studs glittered a dull grey. She pressed them back into the holes so they would not wander from the order Kai had given them.

The pump set an even measure. Three beats and the hose struck the scupper. On the next lift it came free with a long hiss. She counted under her breath in threes because it kept her tone flat and her hands steady when she spoke.

"Two fingers on this gap," Rhea said from the bench, pen between her fingers. Fever had thinned her voice until it was almost clean of anything that might tip them. She paused and swallowed once. She leaned over the metal, her cracked glasses shining not with light so much as wet. She drew a narrow line along the gasket with the pen, the ink turning to a ribbon where the water found it and spread it thinner than it had any right to be. "Allowance eight here between studs. If you seat it with too much bias it will creep to the long edge and you'll chase the whistle."

"Copy," Kai said. He did not reach for the pen. He measured with a thumb and the width of his forefinger and set the washer stack again with practiced movements. He made room for his body to lift and not shake the table. The face panel resisted, then settled under his hands. He worked with what it gave.

Sophie had the log on her knee and the pencil over a line she had drawn earlier: staged. not executed. She had added a small cross in the upper right corner of that box without thinking, then underlined it once.

She ran the edge of her sleeve across a bead that threatened the corner of the page and read the previous lines until they were part of the room: shut. set. open: on command only. seat. fall. whistle: re-seat. only. She kept her mouth shut because anything she might put in the air that wasn't an order or a number was waste.

Ilya watched the floor and then the plate, not because the plate deserved more attention than the floor but because the floor was what taught him the boat. He had his hand back on the panel with the old habit that made sense everywhere he went. He kept his fingers spread and let the vibration tell him what mattered. When the boat rose, he said, "Hold high." When it settled, he said, "Ease low." He coughed into the fold of his shirt and turned the fabric so no one had to see the color. He did not have breath to tell Liv to sit anymore. She would when she could afford it.

"Forward two," Rhea said. She wrote a small 2 in the corner by habit, and then again, and again until the mark steadied her hand. Her glasses slid down her nose. She pushed them up with a finger and went back to the gasket. "You'll feel it try to walk. Push into the long edge on the fall. Don't be generous."

Liv looked at the metal because it didn't pretend to be anything besides what it was. The gasket lay smooth with the sharp corners rounded like Rhea had told her. The foam-backed ring they had cut from the door lay where it would meet the inside of the hull. It would either take the curve of the tear or it wouldn't. She had no energy to make the wrong kind of promises to it. She set two washer stacks from the shallow tin in order and looked across the plate at Kai. "Walk me through the studs."

He fixed each place with his eyes. "Top left," he said, "three fingers to the next. Bottom right, two. The long side wants the door ring to land past the tear. If they don't find at that angle, you take the hatch up or down a finger. That's yours only."

"On my word only," she said. The order set the boundary.

Sophie repeated, soft, because repeating made it live in her mouth and therefore in her hand: "On your word only." She set the pencil down to place the baking tray under a new drip that fell when the pump's hose lifted. She moved the tray two finger widths to catch it and placed the pencil back exactly where it had been.

The boat took a heavier lift. The brace under Liv's palm groaned and then quieted when she made the quarter turn with the wrench she had left lying on the table for this and only this. The pencil line she had drawn earlier on the wood held where she had forced it to stay. She let her hand rest flat for one more breath and then took it away.

"We test the frame," she said.

Kai lifted the plate with careful economy. He put the bottom edge near the hatch coaming and aligned the studs with where they needed to land on the far side. The boat shifted three degrees into her and then away. He kept it clear of the rim. He held it near enough to count and not so close that it misled him. He breathed with the pump so it didn't feel like a thing he had to remember. He nodded when his numbers lined up with Rhea's. "Dry fit is good," he said. "Dry fit is all we get."

"Dry fit is all we get," Liv repeated. She said it so Sophie would have to write it. "Staged. Executing now."

Sophie boxed it. She struck the words not executed once and wrote executing now next to it.

Liv looked down the ledger she had kept in her head since the collision: litres, calories, minutes. She added the plate to it without saying the word water. The desalination unit had become a rectangle of metal with useful holes and a piece of rubber cut from the door. That had been her call. It belonged to breath now. She moved through the last of the things she could give them if they lost the plate to a whistle. "Second wedge," she said, and shook her head. "Not in this sea. If we try the second wedge in this sea, we'll enlarge the tear."

"Exterior cloth," Kai said. He meant the old canvas that wasn't theirs anymore.

"No deck," she said. "No chase." Out the small window was only a color that could have been any hour.

"Horn," Sophie said, without picking it up.

"Not in this," Liv said. "Not yet." She looked toward the radio where the thin tone still hung on the band. She had no intention of spending the room's breath on it. "Flare stays where it is. Hidden. You know the reach."

Sophie put her fingertips on the taped cap behind the shelf and then back on her pencil.

"Numbers," Liv said.

Sophie glanced from hose to dial. "Three. No catch."

Rhea closed her eyes to count the space between water and the next water. "In band," she said, because she had been asked to say it until she couldn't. She angled her face toward the metal cases without reaching. "Barely."

"Warm," Sophie said, watching the heater hose without moving her hand.

"Warm," Rhea repeated, a breath later. The red light through the window stayed steady.

Ilya rolled his head a fraction so he could look at Liv without moving his chest. "The final brace," he said. He swallowed against the dryness sitting on his tongue. "It's the hinge. If it goes slack when he's in, we're done. Say it."

She turned to him because he had asked and because he was the only person in the room allowed to ask her for the shape of a promise. "The final brace is the hinge," she said. "If it goes slack when he's in, we're done."

He kept his eyes on her. The colors in them had been washed out by this room over the last hours. "Again."

"The final brace is the hinge," she said. She didn't add please or sorry. He took a measured breath. He let it out. That counted as his yes.

They set the plate back on the rag. Kai turned the manual drill's handle slowly, testing a hole for burrs. It squeaked and fell quiet. He ran his thumb over the edge and then put the drilled metal against the washer stack to feel for wobble. He found none. He said nothing. He just looked at Liv and then at the hatch. It was his way of saying he was ready without forcing her into hearing it out loud.

"We're not missing anything because we like how it feels to be ready?" Liv asked the room. It was not a question that needed an answer. It allowed them to name any last thing. No one spoke. No one added a missing step.

Sophie sat forward so the log's edge would not slip off her knee the next time the boat took a lift. "I'm going to run the count," she said. "Pump rhythm only."

"Run it," Liv said.

Sophie closed her eyes and spoke numbers into the air until they matched the pump. "Three, throw," she said quietly. "Three, clean. Three, drag." She opened her eyes and looked at the hose. "Drag on two of three," she said. "We'll know it when it stops." She would also watch the scupper hose and Liv.

"Right hand pushes long edge on the fall," Rhea said. "Left hand finds the stud that wants to lie by itself. It's the one that lies too easy. That's the false friend. You put a washer on it and you think, 'That went tidy.' It didn't. Next cycle it hums light and you'll want to talk yourself into it. Don't." She looked at Kai and stated the rule at him. He nodded once, and it read as I heard you.

Ilya coughed again and used the hand on the panel to feel the word he wanted before he spent voice on it. "False seat," he said. "High and thin. Or it settles too clean and fails in two falls. Don't trust it." He closed his eyes and let the last sentence cost him what it cost. For a moment he looked almost asleep. He wasn't.

Liv looked from one face to the next because each of them required something different from her to keep their shapes. Rhea needed a sentence to fight. Sophie needed boxes to draw and a thing to hold on a shelf until the time came. Kai needed a clean order that gave him room to be strong the way he was strong. Ilya needed her to say words back at him like a promise he could hear. She gave them what she had left. "We take the seat on the fall. We do not chase missed falls. We lock on the word only. We do not open for knocks. We do not move for any sentence we didn't agree to." She looked at Sophie. "Write this sentence exactly: We will not spend any belief on anything outside this room."

Sophie wrote, We will not spend belief on anything outside this room. She did not box it.

"Signals," Kai said, turning his head enough so that Sophie would not have to guess whether he was speaking to her or the room. "Knock three when studs are through. Knock twice when backer is down and I'm on the gasket. Whistle calls mean move a hair. No one opens for any sound. 'Set' is the only word that means what it means." He waited. Sophie read the sentence back to him without inflection until the words had weight. He inclined his head and took the plate in his hands.

"Say it," he said to Liv. "Plain."

"I will not open early," she said. "I will not open until you say 'Set' or I say 'Open' and then only on my word."

Rhea drew a small cross where the long tear lived in her drawings and then smudged it with the side of her hand. "Counter-pressure," she said, and directed, "Upper starboard quadrant when you feel the long edge try to peel. Shoulder and palm. Push into it on the fall and let the lift

move under you." She kept her face angled away from him so if he was the kind of man who couldn't look at you when he was about to do a thing like this, he didn't have to. He nodded once. It was nothing, and it was everything they could afford.

Sophie looked at the hatch and then at the plate. "What if he doesn't come back," she asked, and made the question small so no one would get lost in it.

No one answered. No one spoke. The pump hit three and the hose struck and came clean. Liv let the silence be the only answer anyone would get in this room until something else forced a new one onto them.

She put her hands on the hatch slide because the time for looking at metal that wasn't moving had ended. The metal was cold. Her palm found its place. She looked at Kai and then at the place beyond him where nothing lived except a shape of grey. "When you say 'Shut', I say 'Shut acknowledged. Locked until set'." She made herself say it aloud once so that the words would come back out of her mouth later without shaking. She shifted her grip to steady a tremor. She timed her breath to the fall. Salt and diesel marked the air. The voice that came out felt like hers and did not feel like anything else.

"Copy," Kai said. He coaxed the plate up so the studs didn't rattle. He tipped it onto his shoulder and let the left edge rest against the callus there. He shifted his feet to make the deck's angle part of his stance.

The boat rolled and then steadied for half a second. He used that steadiness to get the first two studs to a place where they would not catch skin. He moved toward the hatch. The compartment beyond was cold and damp. Air back there was dense and cold. He stayed quiet.

Liv kept her body where it would shield nothing but the plan. She looked at the wraps Sophie had put on the hatch lines when they had started the controlled flood that morning. They were solid. The lower eye took most of the strain. The cleat was ready under her other hand if she needed it. She kept her palm on the slide, fingers loose so she wouldn't

tighten it without thinking if the angle changed.

"Seat on the fall," Rhea said, low. "Upper starboard quadrant."

He did not turn. He had learned long ago that turning takes more from a body than continuing. He ducked his head, angled the plate, and stepped through the hatch. Cold tightened his chest; his breath hitched and then leveled. The plate pressed hard on his shoulder under the drag. Water rose to his thighs, then his waist, then his chest. He made sure the studs were first through the space so that his hands had something clean to do.

Sophie's breath shortened and then evened without the kind of little sound that would have made it important. She put her eyes on the hose. Switches set. Finger on the toggle. Interval keyed to the hose. "Three," she said to herself. "Three. Clean." She swept the log up an inch so the water on the floor wouldn't climb the page by capillary rise. She didn't write anything. She was not here to make a transcript. She was here to record the thing that made the moment change and only that.

The pump tone held at three.

Ilya looked not at the hatch but at Liv's hands on the slide and the set of her jaw where it held without clenching. He had loved her once in a way that was not useful to this room, and he would not make her hold that as well. He wanted to see the part of her that had learned to stop reaching for the kind lie. He lifted his hand off the panel for one second to feel the amount of room she had left in her. It was not his to take. He set his hand back down before he dropped it.

Liv tracked the timing as the boat set down. The pump threw. The hose came off the scupper. She heard three knocks, dull through water and metal.

"Studs through," Sophie said. Her voice didn't change shape. She put the pencil to the edge of the log and did not write.

Rhea bit the inside of her mouth once because it gave pain a place to live that wasn't her leg. "Upper starboard now," she said. "On the fall."

Liv pressed her palm to the slide. The boat rose. The hose dragged. The pump threw. The room held. She kept her eyes on the edge of the hatch and the space he occupied.

# Chapter 11

## Locked In

Kai's voice came through the metal and the water, clean and low. "Shut."

Her fingers were already where they had to be. "Shut acknowledged. Locked until set," she said, and slid the hatch home. The dogs took in order; they seated evenly. She turned each cam with the same measured pressure, left to right, top to bottom. One. Two. Three. Four. The wraps on the hatch lines stayed as Sophie had set them; the lower eye held the strain. No rush that would come back as an excuse. She set her palms flat across the cold surface and felt the load settle into the hardware. Nothing in her moved toward the idea of mercy that wasn't a plan.

The room contracted to sounds that counted. Sophie's pencil clicked once against the log and then stayed still. The pump ran and the hose knocked the scupper and came off with a hiss that didn't carry as far as it had ten minutes ago. Rhea breathed shallow to keep her leg still and her voice steady. Ilya lay on his better side with one hand spread on the panel, his other hand trapped under him to keep from reaching for a thing that wasn't his to touch.

From inside the flooded space came the clink of short threaded rod against the back of a washer stack and the dull, underwater clap of glove against metal. Three knocks had said studs through. Now the knocks changed shape. A scrape of a plate lifted and set again on a breath that wasn't theirs. A soft whistle threaded under the knocks and cut out on the next fall.

"On the fall", timed to the trough of the pressure pulse, Sophie said, voice close to the pump. She didn't shout. She ran the count against the

machine the way she had practiced it. "Three, throw. Three, clean. Three, drag." Her finger rode the toggle and touched it when the motor stuttered through a bubble. The sound smoothed. She took her hand back and stared at the hose mouth which she could not see, and so watched the section of hose she could see and read it as a proxy for everything she could not.

"Upper starboard. On the fall," Rhea said. Her glasses were wet. The cracked hinge had loosened under the damp so that the left lens canted down until she forced it back with the side of her finger. "Push now. Hold. Wait, not that lift. The next. Now." She bit her lower lip once and let it go. She had marked the long edge with a smudged cross earlier and her pencil kept wanting to return to it. She kept her hand still on the page and used her voice instead.

The hatch bucked against Liv's palms. Not a slam. A heavy insistence. The dogs held. The load wrote itself into her forearms. She didn't move her stance. The part of her that kept lists ticked off the sequence and put it where it belonged. She had told the truth this time. No donor had moved their departure. She had. This was the other end of that arithmetic and she put both hands on it and didn't hedge.

"Ease nothing," she said when the urge to breathe harder crept into the space. "We do not chase a lift."

From inside, metal nicked metal in a cadence that wasn't quite rhythm and wasn't chaos either. A wrench slipped a quarter and then caught. Washers spoke a small ringing word that came through the water thin and bright. The plate met the hull and lifted off. It met again. The gasket took a shape. It tried to spring away on the long edge and then thought of a better use of the force and stayed.

Ilya's voice alarmed them not by volume but by how close it had to be to make sound at all. "Move a hair starboard," he said. "Don't chase the lift." He shut his mouth and swallowed a taste no one asked him to name. His hand pressed down on the panel one finger at a time. He kept it there,

reading what they couldn't see.

"Upper starboard again. On the fall," Rhea said. She didn't add please, because it had no place in the room. She tipped her head to change the angle of her hearing and took another breath through her nose.

The hatch took another shove from the other side. The dogs complained the way old hardware did when it still had enough in it to earn a complaint. Liv put herself over them and pressed in. Her legs knew where to live on this deck. A blow found the middle of the panel beneath her hands and then became a thick thud, less sharp than before. She pictured nothing past the seal because pictures weren't going to buy them anything.

"Partial," came from inside. The word arrived shaped by water and plate and metal and still carried the temper of the man who had said it. It was status, not permission. He had chosen the right word when he had picked the wrong room to stand in and she sent him what he had asked for. "More pressure on the long edge. On the fall."

Sophie's count didn't drift. "Three, throw," she said, and she was talking to a machine and to the space in which the machine lived and to the person who held the hatch and to the one inside the flooded compartment. "Three. Clean. Drag." She blinked and the skin under her eyes went a shade paler, and she pressed the toggle for half a breath at the top of the lift when the motor wanted to suck air and didn't get to. She let it go. She didn't look at the hatch.

Liv's jaw set without clenching. She didn't look at Ilya. She didn't look at the knife cooling on the stovetop or at the kettle whose whistle had cut one bad conversation short earlier in the day and had no use now. She looked at metal where her hands touched it and at the way it changed under load. The wood brace beside her elbow had made a high sound once this hour and she had given it a quarter turn until it shut up. It stayed quiet now, quivering only when the boat met the water wrong and

then right again without her help.

"Hold. Not yet," Rhea said. She had heard a false clean seat more than anyone else in this room, not on boats, but in numbers that liked to lie when you wanted them to behave. "Wait this one. Next fall. On it." The whistle didn't climb.

The next fall came. The plate found a home it had only been pretending to know a moment before. A fine, almost-pleasant squeak at the edge stopped on its own. The hose at the scupper dragged shorter than it had on the last cycle. Liv did not let any of those single facts stick to her in the wrong way. Two faint taps came through the panel. No one moved toward the dogs.

"Again," she said. "Push into it."

The forward window stayed nothing more use than a light grey shape. The horn sat where Sophie had left it and did not travel. The taped flare cap behind the radio shelf pressed a small circle in the tape as if it remembered a different weather, a different error. Sophie would not touch it until she was told a thing that did not live in this room and would not live in this room for some time.

Something shifted inside the compartment and spoke a new noise through the hatch. Not a whistle. A turn of a nut landing home through rubber and metal. Another. Then the short catch of breath that a body made when it had to lift its own weight off something that wasn't designed to take weight and still make hands do what hands were meant to do.

The hatch shivered harder under Liv's hands and then relaxed to a heavy insistence that was the same kind of bad, but smaller. She knew better than to name it. She held it through one full cycle and the next without adding words that weren't instructions.

"Push. On the fall," Rhea said again. She looked at the small cross she had drawn and wished she hadn't. She didn't reach to smear it. She had already smudged it once by accident, and there was a truth in that too.

Inside the hatch, Kai moved the plate with a set of motions that he had picked while watching the way the boat wrote its own rules. He didn't talk through them because talk wasted air. He put his shoulder where Rhea's voice told him to and he took it away only when the boat told him the fall was over and dignity would be wasted if he tried to pretend it wasn't.

Ilya's eyes were shut. His mouth was half-open in the way of a man who had learned how to breathe through pain and still send a sentence into a room when it would buy more than it cost. "Now," he said, so soft that the word almost wasn't there. It landed where it had to. On the fall, not the lift.

Something in the load path gave up complaining and did its work. They felt the change through their feet and in their hands without anyone needing to compare notes. The hinge of the final brace held its promise. Nothing knocked loose. Nothing sang.

"Three, throw," Sophie said again. "Three, clean. Three, drag." She kept her hand off the toggle this time and watched with the quiet, mean concentration of someone who would not give anything to luck.

A hard gust pressed the mast over and the hull dropped sharper on the fall. "Partial," came again. "Bolt through. Final." Then the tone of it sharpened in a way that wasn't words. It wasn't pain. It ended quicker than it started. Sophie's pencil stalled mid-stroke. Rhea's count dropped half a beat, then found the next three. Her breath checked once. There was no next sound from him.

Liv did not lift her hands. She did not say anyone's name in return. She kept the dogs hard under her palms and set her weight through her arms and shoulders and into the floor. The hatch met her stance and settled where she put it.

The pump hit the scupper and the hose came off cleaner. The hiss after didn't climb into a whine. The outlet interval took a breath before it got to the next three. Rhea counted it without closing her eyes. "Four,"

she said, "and a breath." Liv set that gain against the quiet behind the hatch.

Sophie's head tipped as if she could hear warmth move through the heater hose. "Holding," she said, and this time she did raise her voice. Not to make it important but because what was happening had a way of sitting on voices and this one needed to clear the table.

The brace gave a thin buzz under Liv's elbow.

"Hold," Rhea said back fast, before anyone could decide that word was an invitation to reach for a handle. "Not yet. Counter-pressure still catching. Next fall we'll know." She took a thin breath and let it go. She kept her eyes on the page.

Liv listened the way she had learned to listen when there was no room for theater. The dull fists on the hatch changed to something slower. The plate took up the work it had been asked to do and began to believe it could do it. She waited. She did not move. They held until the answer came.

The next fall came and the hose did not drag. The brace stayed quiet under her elbow. The pencil mark didn't move. The thin whistle from a mis-seated place didn't come. Numbers begin when you repeat them and not before, and she made herself take one more. And one more after that. The interval held. Three more cycles moved them from seat to hold.

Sophie took the pencil and wrote holding in the corner of a box she had drawn earlier around a different sentence. She did not box this new word. She underlined nothing. She moved the baking tray a finger's width to catch a new drip and put the pencil where it had been.

The hatch was cold under Liv's palms. Her hands had shaped themselves to its surface and didn't want to belong to anyone else yet. She left them there through three more counts. She counted in threes because that was how she didn't bleed her strength into the floor for no purpose.

Outside, somewhere past the small grey rectangle of a window, the wind flattened, the rigging spread its noise thinner, and the wheel's quiver dropped out. None of those changes put water in a mouth. She kept her hands where they were.

"Liv," Ilya said. Just her name. He didn't ask a question. She nodded once without looking away from the metal. She felt the nod travel down her neck and into her shoulders and into the place where her strength met the hatch. She did not take the smaller answer he wanted, which was to look at him. He did not push for it.

Sophie feathered the toggle a fraction earlier to catch the fall and keep the prime. She watched the hose again and kept her hands busy with the things that were hers. She kept her eyes on the hose. There would be time to look at the hatch later and that would be the wrong time to start learning to keep her eyes on her work.

Rhea's face had gone slack in the way that meant the pain had settled into the corners. Her eyes were wet and the wet left tracks across salt that had dried there, then got wet again. Her mouth didn't make noise. She looked at the numbers that had set them on this path and she did not argue with the cost.

"Heater," Liv said. Sophie reached and then stopped because she had already checked without saying it. "Warm," Sophie answered. The little red light was still there through the plastic window. The hose still felt warm under her fingers. Rhea didn't look at it because it was easier to hold on to the rule that it was fine if she kept hearing it was fine.

"In band," Rhea said. "Barely." She made the word small so it wouldn't undo the place her tears had taken. She folded the corner of the page over itself because it gave her hand something to do that wouldn't move her leg.

Liv closed her eyes once and opened them. She eased pressure just enough to test whether the hatch changed under her hands, the way you tested a dressing to see if blood had made it through. The dogs didn't

give. The panel kept the same conversation going under her palms. She let herself breathe in to the count and out to the count and then she took her hands away as if there was glass all over the top of the hatch and she didn't want to cut herself.

No one moved toward the dogs. No one said the word that would have made the mistake shared instead of owned.

"Write this," she said to Sophie, and kept her tone in the drawer where she stored words that could not afford to shake. "Seal holding. No 'Set' given. Port stays shut. Aft stays sealed. On my word only." She didn't need to say again what her word would be and would not be. Sophie wrote the line without numbering it. There was no time to put it in a tidy list.

The room's smell hadn't improved. Diesel and bleach and old wool lived together here, with a brine-metal edge at the hatch seal, and would live together for a while longer. Condensation ticked from the ceiling into the tray and the tray made a sound that would be good in a room where the people weren't counting their breaths. Here it only marked the edge of a silence that could not be allowed to grow.

Liv picked up the wrench and gave the brace a hair that didn't need taking. It didn't make a sound either way. She set the wrench back down and moved it half an inch so her fingers would find it without looking if she needed it later.

"Horn?" Sophie said, with no intent in it, just habit's shape.

"Not in this," Liv said. "Not yet."

Sophie nodded and touched the radio with the back of her knuckles. The thin tone was still there. She left it where it was because there was nothing else to do with it that would buy them a different future in this hour.

"Outlet," Liv said.

Rhea listened. She closed her eyes not for comfort but because it helped the part of her that knew how to turn sound into a count. "Four," she said. "And a breath." She added, very soft, "For now."

They stayed where they were and did the tasks that lived under their hands. Sophie shifted the tray again when the ceiling found a fresh path for a drop. She feathered the toggle at the stutter and kept the cadence even. Ilya kept his hand on the panel and let it report the world to him because that was the only world he could read in his condition. Rhea tracked numbers and warmth and the place where the plate met the hull, all by ear. Liv kept still in the center of the room and let what she had done settle into the boat until the boat had to take it and make it the new rule.

There were sentences that would have let them use up what the work had bought. No one said them. There were questions that would have traded what they had for a different kind of quiet. They did not ask them. The hatch stayed shut because that was what they had agreed may happen before the hour started and because there was nothing they could add to that sentence that would make it better now.

Outside, the wind carried less freight across the deck. The rigging quit the single angry sound that had pinned itself behind Liv's left ear and spread it out thinner. The boat found a line it didn't hate and then lost it and then found it again faster. The sound of water at the torn seam changed its voice to one none of them had heard since the old canvas had peeled away and become part of what they could no longer count as their own. The change meant a thing they wanted and it might not mean that thing the next minute. They did not spend it as proof.

"Numbers," Liv said. She needed the ledger to say it back to her to make it a fact in the world and not something that lived under her ribs. "No changes."

"Numbers stay," Sophie said, echoing the rule they had all agreed to this morning when the room had been a different shape. "One-fifty every

eight. No exceptions. Heater stays. No tea."

Rhea nodded once. She let her breath hitch because it had to. "In band," she said. "Barely."

Liv looked at the tin with the spare washers and studs that they hadn't needed. One stayed on its edge for a moment and then fell to flat with a sound that had no extra meaning and tried to get some anyway. She told it no by not moving her eyes to it. She tapped the line Sophie had written earlier about the seal. "Logged," she read back, flat.

They lived there for a while, and while was the only measure they had available that didn't lie. The pump pushed water through the hose and the hose slapped and came off and the hiss had a new duration that nobody named. The brace under Liv's elbow stayed quiet. The hatch pressed back at her from nowhere because her hands weren't on it anymore and her body had not learned that yet. She let the muscles in her forearms fail a little and found that they still held when she let them.

Ilya moved his head enough to make the world shift by a centimeter and then put it back where it had been. He cleared his throat once and didn't show anyone the color. He didn't say the word that belonged to the other side of the hatch because he was not the person who would say it for them and they didn't need to hear it either.

Sophie's eyes flicked to the horn and away and she let herself imagine the sound of it hitting the fog and being eaten and coming back a dull lie. She didn't reach for it. She put her hand on the heater hose and made herself notice the warmth as a number, not as comfort. "Warm," she said out loud so Rhea wouldn't have to ask.

The boat picked up a roll that wasn't generous and then let it go. The wind outside turned one corner of itself toward a direction she liked better and then decided against it. Liv watched the hatch. She watched the brace. She watched Sophie's hands. She watched Rhea's mouth go to a flat line and stay there and not quite shake. She watched Ilya's fingers spread on the panel and make a small movement and then stop. She let

the space be what it was without putting words on it that would make it have to become something else.

When she spoke, she used the voice that fit in a space that was smaller than the things it had to hold. "Breath now," she said. Not the past. Not the price. Not the next day and the day after, with the water they didn't have anymore. The pump ran for one more cycle.

No one answered. No one needed to. The hatch stayed shut. The thin radio tone stayed thin. The fog behind the small window lifted half a shade and fell back again. The quiet wasn't peace and wasn't danger. It was the quiet they had paid for, and they kept it.

# Chapter 12

## Drift

The silence after work was not empty. It carried rules. The pump ran with a steadier muscle and the hose came off the scupper without the old drag. The hiss after did not rise into anything thin. Rhea slept in broken pieces under a blanket that had once been clean enough to shame them. Sophie moved as if the room had drawn lines across the floor and she could see them. The kettle stayed where she had strapped it, dry, its handle cinched under the guard. No flame under it. No steam. No whistle to cut another conversation.

Liv set the communal mug on the table and filled it to the mark she had made with a thumbnail and a bad pen. One capful at a time so her hand couldn't lie. The water held cold on the ceramic. She did not say drink. She tipped the cup to Rhea's mouth, watched a small swallow, then away. The rest went down the line where it always went, the same order, the same amount, her last. Sophie did not look up from the log when the mug touched her hand. She took the mouthful, wrote a line, and handed it on.

She didn't change the numbers. "One-fifty every eight. No exceptions. Heater stays. No tea."

Sophie wrote it without underlining any part of it. She kept the pencil low so it would not fall if the boat changed its mind and rolled them wrong. The pencil went across the book's spine. She checked the hose by touch.

Rhea's eyes slit open. She was still under the fever's hand but she counted anyway, looking past Liv's shoulder toward the small port that held a bad light. "In band," she said. The word after lived under her

breath. "Barely." The skin under her hairline had shine to it again. She closed her eyes without finishing the thought she had been writing in her head.

The hatch panel was a flat plane under Liv's palm. It told her nothing she wanted and everything she needed, just load and the absence of the blows that had ruled the hour before. She kept her hand there because her body hadn't learned that she could take it away and the steel would not change its mind. The dogs stayed firm. She did not test them again.

Ilya's voice came from low to the floor, stripped to what air would carry. "You're not going to open it." He had a way of turning a sentence into a measure. It wasn't accusation. It wasn't permission. It was a check on the ledger.

"No," Liv said. She didn't fill the space around it. "It's answered." She did not touch the dogs when she said it.

He closed his eyes and the lids fluttered once. He still had a hand on the panel where the sound ran, and he still read what the boat was saying that way, though there was less to gather now. He moved his fingers apart and together as if he was teaching himself a new task and didn't have the time to master it.

Sophie lifted the radio and set it back down. A thin tone stayed under the noise. Sophie moved with the economy of someone used to hearing around that tone. She picked up the horn, set it where she liked it, and didn't make it speak. Her hands returned to the toggle the way a person comes back to a stove left on low. At a stutter, she breathed half a second into the switch and the motor smoothed again.

"The engine?" she asked. It wasn't a push. She needed to know which world they were in this hour.

"Quiet," Liv said. "We drift."

Sophie nodded once and wrote that the engine was off, then closed the book most of the way to keep the pages in place against condensed

drops. A new drip path had cut itself beside the old one. She nudged the tray one finger-width without looking at it and left it to ring the way metal rings when it has something to do.

Rhea woke long enough to find her voice again. "Outlet," she said.

Sophie counted. "Four," she said. "And a breath." She didn't make it a celebration; numbers did not like that. Liv nodded and let the agreement stand without saying it out loud.

They lived like that for a while. The pump threw and came off clean. The tray's rim took a new drip and rang. The hose to the heater ran where no one had intended.

Liv sat on the edge of the bench with her boots planted where she had scuffed the floor earlier with a panicked turn. She straightened a mug handle she hadn't noticed turning. She made herself stop moving her hands and let the next call come from someone else.

The light outside had flattened and a rank of grey laid across the small window. The fog wasn't thick enough to give them the excuse not to look and not thin enough to give them anything. Liv kept the port-side hatch rule in her mouth like a coin. "Port stays shut," she said, not because anyone had asked but because it had to be said again before it was needed.

Sophie wrote it at the top of a new line. She put a small dot under the last letter for no reason except that it kept the letter where it belonged.

The smell in the room had settled to something manageable: diesel, old wool, bleach, salt, and a sharper edge near the hatch they had sealed. It was the smell of a space that wouldn't let go of anything and had fewer places to put it.

Ilya shifted, found the place on his side that did not set everything off, and went still. He looked at the edge of the table where the plate had rested before it had gone where it needed to go. He touched the scar in the varnish the plate had left. Nothing in his face lifted. He closed his eyes

and opened them again as if making sure the lids still knew how.

"Liv," he said after a minute that had shape to it. He had to work for a breath between word and word. "You'll keep it in the log. The words the way they were said. Not better."

"Yes," she said. She wasn't going to say she already had. Sophie would read it back when it mattered and the reading would be enough.

He nodded and let his head slide a little on the folded jacket under it. He reached with the hand under him and let it fall back. The hand on the panel stayed where it was. The boat told him less now. He squinted like a man reading small print in bad light.

When the pump cycle eased, Rhea's breathing took the room for a second and gave it back. She floated up. The fever had fallen off her face a little and left a crust of salt behind. "Heater?" she asked.

"Warm," Sophie said.

"In band," Rhea said. The word after didn't change. "Barely." Her eyes tracked to the hatch and stopped there, then went away.

The next hour wore itself down without extra noise. Liv let it. There were not many things she could give the crew that would not cost them something else. The quiet where the whistle should have lived was what she had to offer. She kept it and kept them in it.

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Dark found the boat without needing to work hard at it. The edges of things got softer and the room did not. The pump drummed the same pattern at a lower volume. Liv looked for the change with her ears instead of her eyes, because that was where it would arrive if it was coming.

Ilya could not get enough air without making a sound at the end of it. It wasn't a cough and wasn't a groan. It was the small noise a body made when it had to work to do something it had done without thinking until

an hour ago. He rolled a fraction and stopped himself before the movement set his side off.

"Liv," he said. The word didn't have call in it. He had made it up to the place where he gave things away. "Promise me you won't call it mercy." His eyes were open and steady on her hands. He was looking for the way her fingers would twitch when she wanted to reach for a softer word.

She set her hands flat on the table, the same way she set them on a chart when she had to pick a line that would make someone else angry. "I promise," she said. "It wasn't mercy." She did not add anything. She kept both hands flat and her jaw tight.

He blinked once. The corner of his mouth moved enough to mark agreement. He didn't try to make it a smile. He turned his face toward Sophie without lifting his head. "Keep calling," he said. There was a ghost of humor in it that did not apologize for itself. "Even if it's foolish."

Sophie's hands were already on the radio. She did not look up or away. She keyed and spoke and let go. The room waited for a change that did not come. "I'm calling," she said. "I'm still calling."

The thin tone was there again under the noise. They all worked past it with practice.

Rhea surfaced out of the shallow place where the fever kept her and reached across the small space between her bench and the floor where Ilya lay. Her fingers found his wrist. She did not squeeze hard because she knew her strength and he knew his. Her mouth moved and then she closed it and left it at that.

He turned his hand palm up so that hers would land on the soft there and not on the bones that had begun to look like they belonged to someone older. He looked at the hatch again because there was nothing else to look at that did not ask for a future. He drew a breath that made no promise and let it out.

The pump threw, clean. The hose slapped and fell back quiet. The hatch did not move under Liv's palm when she put it there for a breath then took it away. The plate held. That was the truth they had paid for.

Ilya's chest rose and fell once more and the small sound did not come after. The room paused, the way rooms do when the person who filled them in one particular way is not there anymore to give the place that shape. The pump went on. The drip off the ceiling found the tray's rim and rang. The heater stayed warm.

Sophie did not pick the pencil back up. She put the radio down flat and put her hand on the table and left it there. Rhea's fingers stayed on his wrist until it made sense to take them away. She moved them to the blanket's edge that had wrinkled itself around his shoulder in the way of things that did not care about the timing of their movements.

Liv folded the dry galley cloth once, then again, and set it over Ilya's face, careful with the places where air goes in and out, because it mattered to do the small things right even when the large thing had already been decided. The cotton was cool and a little stiff. The fold lay along his cheekbone and kept its shape. The cloth was meant to dry plates that would never be washed again by this crew. It had not needed to be this clean and she used it because it was. She set her palm to the hatch panel for one slow count, then took it away.

"Log it," she said. She didn't say the word for what it was. Sophie wrote a line with no extra lettering. Rhea looked at the pencil and then back at the hatch.

No one reached for the dogs. No one said anything that spent belief on things not in the room. Sophie set the tray a finger-width again to catch a new drop and wiped her nose on the back of her hand because there was a practical reason to do it right then.

"Outlet," Liv said after the next cycle, because the ledger did not forgive long pauses. Rhea listened. "Four," she said. "And a breath." She did not add what she wanted for that breath. The boat kept the count

honest on its own.

They shifted the weight they were in the way a small room makes people shift. The radio's cord ticked a cup and Sophie eased it clear. Rhea set her knee a quarter-inch into a corner of folded cloth and the pain checked her hard but did not break her breathing.

Sophie looked at the horn and then at Liv. She didn't pick it up. She keyed the radio and read the sentence she had been saying for a day that had eaten itself. She spoke numbers that made a shape in the air and gave no one what they needed. "No joy," she said without being asked.

Liv set the back of her hand to the heater hose and left the reading unspoken. She moved to the small window, saw nothing, and learned nothing. She returned to the hatch and put her palm there for one count of three and then took it away just as carefully.

Time did the only thing it knew and walked around them. Rhea slept and woke and slept again. The cloth on Ilya's face took on a weight that wasn't there when it had been folded. The pump asked for no thanks and got none. They stood through the next pump run; the hose came off clean and the panel stayed quiet.

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By the next day, near sunset, the fog's surface thinned and the light over the water dropped its color out without offering sight. The deck underfoot had lost the wrong pitch it had been favoring all afternoon. The line hums were gone. The wheel at the cockpit was still with a quiet that put something in Liv's stomach that was not fear and not relief.

Sophie paused the pencil above the page. The muscles in her forearm had found a way to work without wasting any motion. She tilted her head half an inch. The radio's thin tone stayed. The pump kept its rhythm. The quiet shifted at the edge of hearing, a periodic thrum that did not match the swell. Low and far. It went, then returned faint.

"Do you hear that?" she asked the air first, then the people. She did not say it again because that would have put more weight on a sound than it had earned.

Liv stepped to the ladder and lifted herself two treads without taking time from the room. She looked through the forward pane at a gray that could be a thousand meters or ten. She closed her eyes to strip the sight out and let the other sense through. The boat creaked along one seam and quieted. Far out, low and steady. Could be wind. Could be nothing. Could be the thing that mattered next.

"Maybe," she said. "I hear something." She kept her mouth from adding hope to the end of the sentence.

"Radio?" Sophie asked.

"Call it," Liv said. Sophie called it. The same sounds returned from the box that had become part of the room. "No joy," she said with her voice level.

Rhea lifted her head and that was enough to let pain into the room again. "Is it real?" She was asking the people and the boat and the weather. Her eyes went to Liv for a number and she kept her breath shallow.

"Maybe," Liv said again. "We don't spend it yet." She put her hand on the back of the bench because she had to put it somewhere.

She went up, moved to the wheel, and wrapped her palm around it gently enough to make sure she was the only one making it move. The world offered no helm feedback of its own. That was a gift and a trap. She eased the throttle enough to bring a low sound through the hull. A faint diesel tang came into the air and a brief vibration ran through the wheel. She counted heartbeats and cut it. The boat settled into a drift biased where she wanted, the bow pointed across where their charts had shown open lanes and where the low sound might be.

Back below, Sophie had not stopped working the toggle, the way she had learned to work it, light and exactly when needed. She noted when Liv started and cut and left the line beside fuel blank because there was no point writing a number no one could know with accuracy.

The outlet interval lifted to five through one full sequence. "Five," Rhea said, surprising herself. She allowed one part of her face to loosen the smallest amount. She made herself put it back where it had been so it would not pull something she couldn't afford.

The hatch panel under Liv's palm felt like it had when she had trusted it for the first time since the plate went in. No new complaint, no new get-ready tone. She took her hand away and did not feel forced to put it back immediately. That counted for something none of them would name out loud.

They held for three cycles and the five returned on the third in the same way it had come the first time. In between, it was four and a breath. That was good enough for a room that had taught itself to stop wanting more than it could own.

Sophie set the horn on the shelf within reach. "Not in this?" she asked, a habit turned question.

"Not yet," Liv said. "We use that when there's something to ask."

Sophie nodded without taking her eyes off the hose. Rhea's left hand touched one of the ice-core canisters as if the metal could take a share of her fever. The canister didn't care about the heat in her palm and did not have to.

Dusk went by increments, and the sea eased for a stretch. It was not peace. It was an interval in which nothing offered to kill them for a minute at a time.

"Numbers," Liv said. She did not know whether she was asking for numbers in the log or numbers in the world.

"Numbers stay," Sophie said. "One-fifty every eight. Heater stays. No tea." She looked at the kettle and then away again. The strap over its handle had not moved. No hot supper.

Liv took the wheel again for half a minute and brought the bow two degrees by feel. The engine stayed off. She did not need more than the shape of the hull in the water to move their drift a fraction. She came back down and took her place where she needed to be to read the boat. The sound from outside remained only a possibility.

Rhea set her head down and moved her leg as little as someone could move a leg. Her mouth opened. "Don't spend it," she said. Her eyes were closed. She might have been dreaming numbers.

Liv stood at the hatch for the last light and watched the panel as if the steel could be read like a chart. She tried to let her mind go blank enough that the next change would not have to push through anything soft to reach her. The pump threw. The hose came off clean. The hiss stayed where it belonged. She took one breath in, two out, and counted three in her head because that was how she kept from being generous.

The portlight darkened to black. They held their places and did their jobs. The low sound outside never reached proof and did not fall away for long. It stayed at the edge of hearing. The patch held. The hatch stayed sealed. They left the fuel alone again. The room contained exactly what it had to, no more.

Sophie slid the log half under the radio shelf and tucked the pencil in the coil of its cord the way she always did when she knew she would reach for it again in less than ten minutes. She put her hand on the heater hose and said "Warm" softly. Rhea didn't answer. That was allowed.

Liv let the last light go and didn't chase it with words. She looked once at the cloth over Ilya's face and made herself stop with that look. The ledger could hold a name without saying it. She placed her hands flat on the table because work sits better when the hands know where to rest. The pump ran. The hull sounds stayed even. Outside, something might

have been there. She kept that in the quiet, where it belonged.

# Chapter 13

## Horizon

Morning was thin and even. Light reached the room without changing it. The pump still ran, steady enough that the hose at the scupper came off clean and the hiss after stayed contained. Condensation pattered from the cabin ceiling into the baking tray Sophie had set, now moved a finger's width left again to catch a new path. The cloth over Ilya's face kept its fold. The hatch panel under Liv's palm was inert.

Sophie eased the log out from under the radio shelf and didn't open it all the way. She put her hand on the heater hose as if confirming what she already knew would hold. "Warm," she said. Rhea opened her eyes halfway and looked toward the port where the light had gone from black to a grey that didn't give distance. "In band," she said. "Barely."

Liv set the communal mug down and filled to the line she had marked with her thumbnail and the bad pen. One capful at a time, counted quiet. She tipped it for Rhea. A swallow, precise as a number. She moved the mug on. Sophie took hers without looking up and wrote nothing while she swallowed. Liv drank last and replaced the cap with the care people reserve for fragile things that shouldn't be fragile. "Numbers stay. One-fifty every eight. No exceptions. Heater stays. No tea."

"Logged," Sophie said softly, though she had not yet written the line. She touched the radio rather than key it. The thin tone under the noise had become part of the room.

She left the radio and reached for the small radar set. When she switched it on, the casing started its quiet hum. The screen brought up a soft bloom and then settled. Sophie used the edge of her sleeve to wipe moisture from its face, a small domestic motion that kept something

clean without promising outcome. She dialed gain up a fraction, then down. She waited. The pump ran. The hose knocked the scupper and came off without dragging. She steadied her breath; her hands were steady at the toggle.

A smear flickered at the edge. She didn't say it. She waited through another sweep, then the next. The smear came back, faint and not persistent enough to trust yet. She counted two sweeps. On the third, it sat the smallest amount heavier than nothing.

"Echo," she said, level. "Starboard bow. Three, maybe four."

Liv took her hand off the hatch and didn't have to put it right back. She climbed two treads and looked through the forward pane, learned nothing, and closed her eyes to listen. Outside was the same grey with the same wrong weight. The room was the same. But the word marked the moment. She dropped back down and put her palm on the table to keep from spending belief out loud.

"Could be weather," Rhea said. She kept her eyes on the numbers. "Could be clutter. Don't spend it until it holds."

Sophie nodded without moving her eyes off the screen. "Holding, first pass."

Liv looked at the engine panel. She didn't like spending fuel with the gauge where it sat. Worse when the call depended on that number. She put her hand on the throttle anyway. "Two count," she said, to no one and to everyone. She eased it and felt vibration come up through the hull, a change in the way the table vibrated through its wood screws. Exhaust thickened the air.

She counted heartbeats to three, cut, and listened. The pump's cadence came through unchanged. Sophie watched the screen. The smear sharpened by a hair. "There."

"Range," Liv said.

"Three. Closer if it's large and we're getting a slice of something else." Her voice stayed level. She didn't lift the pencil. She didn't reach for the horn.

Rhea's mouth went thin. "We use the flare if it doesn't hold. Not before."

Liv watched Sophie's shoulders and then the small place where Kai had always stood to plant his feet without wasting motion. The boathook lay near the ladder, the end wrapped with tape from a job he had done that no one else remembered doing. His place was a cut-out spot in the room that didn't fill in. She got close to the edge of that thought and turned away from it before it took her with it.

The radar smear doubled and then thinned. Sophie ran her sleeve across the screen again and kept the gain where it was. "Echo holds," she said. "Bearing constant by a hair."

Liv nodded. "We'll spend a count." She brought the engine on again, long enough to turn the bow by a small angle and send them toward a line only the set showed. The wheel gave back a small tremor through the spokes; she knew it. She cut again and let the boat settle into the bias she had given it. The pump threw and came off clean. Rhea whispered the number out of habit. "Four, and a breath."

Sophie took a deeper breath. "Call?"

Liv shook her head. "No. Not for that box. We don't add to noise until we have something to ask."

Rhea nodded once. "Flare only when we're sure."

The smear fattened. It moved the smallest amount toward center with each sweep. Sophie pressed her lips together and stayed quiet. She moved her eyes to the window and back to the screen, steady. The thin tone under the radio noise did not change.

"One more count," Liv said quietly. She gave the engine enough to keep the bow aimed across what their charts had called lanes and cut

again. No drag on the scupper. No change at the brace. The hatch stayed firm under her hand when she checked it and then lifted away before she wanted to.

"It's coming," Sophie said. "Or we are."

Rhea wiped sweat from her lip with the back of her hand. "If it's nothing, that's fine. We keep the numbers the same."

The smear resolved into a mark that stopped being just an artifact. It held from sweep to sweep. Sophie let the pencil tap the log and then set it down again. "There."

Liv kept her voice low. "We light it." She drew one long breath and let it go. Hands moved.

Rhea's answer came fast, as if wanting to get in front of the act. "It's one. If it's dead, we're done with that tool."

"We're done with that tool either way," Sophie said. She leaned into the shelf to reach behind the radio and took out the aged flare. The paper at the base had that soft feel that said it had been soaked and dried more than once. The cap had more give than it should. She unrolled a strip of tape and set the cap back hard. Boathook in hand, she taped the flare to the end in a clean spiral so the handle would sit steady against the wood. She tested the wobble and found none. "We need height."

Liv looked at the hatch again. She felt the small urge to say not in this and didn't say it. "We light it. Sophie, you clip in. You don't go past the shelter. Don't fight anything on the deck that isn't the flare. On my word, you go."

Sophie already had the belt on. She clipped to the line that ran under the companionway and then to the secondary tie at the chainplate base. Rhea's breath shortened. She said, "On the window it's nothing. On the set it's something. Don't spend it hard."

Liv put a hand on Sophie's arm. "We're not going to chase a lift. If the deck shifts against you, you step back into the boat you know." She let her

hand fall away. "Go."

Sophie climbed the ladder, slow and deliberate, testing every handhold like it had been moved when she wasn't looking. The exterior air pressed cold into the space that opened when she slid the hatch and kept it there. Liv watched her step no farther than the coaming and kneel. Sophie balanced the boathook, kept three points on something fixed, and pulled the cap. The spark hesitated against damp and then took. Flame took and held steady. It hissed and made a steady pillar that threw a new color onto the fog. She raised her arms until the flare's burning head sat above the boat's mast angle. The hiss climbed with the height and held. The smoke lifted in a straight seam and held despite the wind.

"There," Sophie said, to say she was in control of the thing in her hands and not the other way around.

Rhea's mouth opened and shut. She didn't tell Sophie to drop it. She didn't tell her to wave it. She kept her hands still while the line burned steady.

Liv counted and didn't say what number she was on. She watched the flare burn down and didn't ask it to do more work than it could. She looked up, then down, then at Sophie's shoulders without adding her fear to the weight there. The pump ran. The hose came off clean. The tray rang once and settled.

At the edge of sight, an answer flare lifted. It didn't waver. It burned where a vessel that had seen them would show. It held.

"Answer," Sophie said. The word came out rough from days of "No joy." She lowered the flare a fraction so it would last the seconds it needed to and kept it steady.

Rhea let out a long breath. Shoulders dropped along the bench. "Don't spend words," she said, and then didn't spend any.

Liv's hand found the throttle. She brought the engine on and didn't try to make it do a thing it couldn't. She brought their bow over by

degrees, enough to make their answer true. She cut the engine and let drift and intention carry what engine couldn't buy. She closed the hatch behind Sophie as soon as her boots were inside, and Sophie was still clipped when she did it, and that mattered.

"Again?" Sophie asked, looking at the spent flare and the shelf where there wasn't a second.

"No," Liv said. "They're here, or they aren't. We've said what we can say."

Sophie nodded and slid the boathook down beside the ladder, the tape still warm under her fingers. The spent tube went into a corner where it wouldn't roll. She keyed the radio. She spoke their name, the boat, the position. The radio carried the same thin tone under noise that had been with them. It caught on a syllable that might have been a word and fell. "No joy," she said quietly, and that was all.

Liv kept the engine for another two count and cut it. Sophie watched the set. The mark on the screen moved the right way. No one looked at the horn. No one needed to. They all had their hands full.

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The freighter's shape didn't arrive all at once. First there was a wall that didn't belong to the fog. Then there were hard edges where fog usually blurred everything. Metal took up a piece of horizon they had trained themselves not to expect. The sound came after, a deeper thrum than their engine, thick enough to change the way the air lay on their skin. A light high on a mast cut an angle through the haze.

Liv had the wheel and didn't let her hands tell anyone what they were. She eased them into the freighter's lee, where the wind had a different job. The big hull's push created a pocket that wasn't calm so much as controlled by the hull. She worked them into that pocket without making it a stunt. She didn't like stunts as answers to anything that

mattered.

Wake found them anyway. It came off the freighter's side as a small wall. It hit their bow and ran along their hull. The boat shifted her weight. The hatch under Liv's hand stayed steady; no new give. The brace gave a half-beat squeal that would usually earn a quarter-turn; she didn't touch it. The pump hose dragged at the scupper for a fraction of a beat and then cleared. Rhea said "Four" in a steady voice.

Sophie stood at the ladder, shoulders tucked small. Her eyes went from the freighter's deck to Liv's hands and back. A man on the freighter's rail raised an arm in a clear pattern. Sophie raised both her hands to show she had him, then translated out loud without looking away. "Hold there. We're in your lee. Prepare for line."

Liv cut the engine and let the lee hold them. Her hand stayed on the wheel and her weight stayed where it kept the boat predictable. Sophie keyed the radio again. The radio carried a fragment of voice and then broke it. She nodded to the man at the rail to say she had heard him anyway. He nodded back and unfolded a coil of line that looked absurdly clean from where they were.

Rhea moved her hands to show she remembered her job, even if her leg had other ideas about where it belonged.

Another set of arms moved above, wider this time. "Strop. First lift is the injured." He caught Liv's eye for a beat; the sequence was understood. She would be last.

Rhea swallowed. "Last," she said. "Get Sophie up first."

"No," Liv said. She didn't raise her voice. She didn't make it a debate. "You go first. You're hurt and you're the one with numbers in your head I need to hand to someone if I don't make that deck."

Rhea's mouth formed a line that said she had a retort worth hearing. She looked at the hatch. She kept silent. She didn't have a thing to add that wouldn't cost them. "Copy," she said, and let that be obedience and

love and anger all at once.

The freighter's crew threw a heaving line that landed true. Sophie stepped to the coaming and took it. She made one turn on a cleat to hold it and then lifted the strop that came down the line. She brought it into the cabin because the deck was a place where people got stupid when they were tired and this was not the hour to be stupid. Liv eased the boat a half-breadth closer with the engine and then cut again.

"We lift on their count, not ours," Liv said. She took the strop and brought it around Rhea's torso the way she had learned once and hoped her hands had not forgotten. "This is going to bite here," she warned, touching a point with two fingers so Rhea would know where to brace. "We're not going to add voice to it."

Sophie looked at the rail. Fingers signaled down. She relayed. "Ready."

Liv put her palm on Rhea's shoulder. "You don't have to make a sound you don't want to."

Rhea set her jaw and let them seat the lift. When the line took, her breath broke once. It didn't turn into a sound. The strop lifted her out of the cabin space she had been welded to for hours. It swung her in a careful arc. People above steadied the swing with a line staged there. They took her weight like they had been doing this in other bad rooms without being watched. She went up the shape of a wall and disappeared over the high rail. Sophie watched that rail until Rhea's head came over it again, small but upright, and then she looked at Liv for permission.

"You next," Liv said.

Sophie looked at the heater hose one more time. She laughed once without sound. She hooked into the strop and didn't waste a motion. The freighter's crew lifted. She put her hands where they told her without making them say it twice. When she cleared the rail, she turned her face back down to the boat.

A deeper thrum ran through the hull; the lee pressure rose and steadied.

Liv was alone with the boat for the first time since the hatch had become what it had become. She put her palm on the panel because there were no eyes in the room now that needed to see her do it. She took her hand away because the panel gave her nothing new. Her jaw loosened, then set again. She looked at the place on the floor where the plate had rested before it went in and found her mind starting to name it a last thing. She didn't allow it. She moved to the ladder because lines were going to come down again whether she was ready or not.

A face appeared above that wasn't a man she knew. He had a jacket with reflective tape, and his mouth moved in a way that did not ask for comfort. He pointed to the rail where a cargo net had been unfurled for backup. He pointed at her, then lifted a hand single finger to hold: cores first.

Liv nodded. He didn't know what he was asking for. He had asked for it anyway. She went to the lash points that had kept the weight she had chosen to carry in the line of gravity the way she needed. She undid straps and didn't curse the knots that had been tied by hands that weren't going to untie anything again. Liv lifted the first canister without making a sound to go with it. She passed it up with both hands, made sure the person on the net had it, and didn't let go until she felt weight leave her as proof instead of hope.

"Another," the man at the rail called, the word not loud but placed where it needed to be to cross the space.

She passed the next, then the next. She watched the thermometers through their ports as if the numbers would change because she looked. They stayed where Rhea said they were. Barely. She didn't tell anyone that number. She didn't have to. The person above who took each weight said it with his hands by how he held them. On the final pass, her thumb set against the handle lip at the same angle as on the hatch dog; she

released only when the lift took the weight. When the last canister went up, she rested her hand on the place they had lived and didn't apologize to the room for doing it.

The freighter's face appeared again, closer this time. He pointed to the strop and then to her. She looked one more time toward the aft hatch. Cold bled off the metal in the aft bulkhead. The ladder frame under her forearm held no new tremor. She didn't walk those steps. She didn't say any words to it. She kept the line that had held through the night and was going to have to hold without her.

She hooked into the strop. The wrench went back to where she had left it half an inch for easy reach before. She closed her fingers around a piece of line that wasn't needed, then let it drop. She looked once at the cloth over Ilya's face and not twice. She stood under the companionway and steadied her own swing so the people above wouldn't have to spend extra on her.

The lift took her up. For a second, she saw the boat entire. It sat tucked into the freighter's lee. The wedge and the brace held. The hose at the scupper sent water into water. The hatch looked the same from above as it had from below. She let herself believe one thing for one second: that it would stay as it was until someone who knew what they were doing could take it apart and call what had been done in there by its names.

Hands took her weight. She cleared the rail. Deck came under her feet that didn't give back the way hers had. A smell that wasn't hers took her lungs: hot steel, cleaner, heavy oil. Sophie was there with eyes too bright. She reached for Liv without asking. Liv let the contact land. One breath. Then she stepped back because the work had not forgiven breaks yet.

"Samples?" a voice asked. It belonged to the man who had pointed down. He had a headset around his neck. He kept it ready.

"Up," Liv said. "All of them. In band." She didn't add the word; he didn't need to know their faith in barely. "Heater is still on."

"Any more? People?" He wasn't looking past her shoulder to find answers in a place where they didn't live. He looked at her face, and then he looked down because that's what someone like him had learned to do.

"Two down," Liv said. "One sealed inside the patch. One died after." She didn't give names. He didn't ask for them. He nodded without doing anything to his mouth that would turn this into a moment that would need cleaning later.

Sophie put a hand on Liv's elbow and then took it away. "Rhea's on a bench. She's conscious. Leg's splinted. Fever but she's been counting anyway."

"You kept your log?" the man asked, not because he had time for it but because he had the kind of mind that liked things in their place when later came.

Liv looked at Sophie. "We kept it. The words the way they were said. Not better." Sophie had it under her arm already. She offered it without hesitation.

Another man in orange and a woman with a harness came to take the canisters to cold storage. They moved them without comment.

On the other side of the rail, Calyptra sat in the notch of water the big hull created. The pump's rhythm didn't reach this height as anything more than a suggestion in the deck. The freighter's engine filled the deck noise. Liv's body reached for the pump's count anyway and found it missing. She swallowed and stood in the new noise. It felt wrong because the pump's count had been the only clock that counted for a day and a night. It felt right because other hands were taking the work for a while.

"We're going to put a line on her and keep her there until we figure the next thing," the man said, already signaling for that line. "We won't open what you shut."

Liv met his eyes because a person on a deck like this needed that kind of promise to land, not just be said. "Thank you. Port stays shut. Aft stays

sealed. On my word only." He said, "Port closed, aft sealed, on your word." He nodded and wrote the sentence with a finger in the air, to put it into his own brain where it needed to live.

They turned toward the ladder that would take them somewhere warmer and more blinding than anything the cabin had prepared them for. Before she stepped away, Liv put both hands on the rail and looked down. The cloth under the waterline was gone. The rigid plate inside their boat was theirs, and it was holding, and she had locked the hatch on the person who made it hold, and she was not going to call it mercy. She didn't move her mouth when she thought it. She didn't have to.

Sophie had a small muscle working in her cheek. She raised the horn and then put it back down. She looked at Liv and then away.

Rhea lay on a bench with a blanket that smelled like a room without damp. Her glasses had been straightened by hands that didn't talk while they did the work. She saw Liv and reached for her without moving her leg. "In band," she said. It wasn't about the cores anymore. It was about their state. Liv understood what she had chosen to call fine.

The deck under Liv vibrated with a steadiness that wasn't hers to manage. She let the new rhythm in without asking it to prove itself every third beat. She watched a crewman pay out a line over the rail, saw it strike water, saw it take tension. Calyptra took the line and held steady.

"We'll sit her down in calmer water and make a plan about taking her under tow," the man said. He didn't know he had said what she needed to hear. He had.

Liv wasn't the captain of this deck. She didn't have to be. She stood where they put her and kept her mouth smaller than it had been because the room didn't require commands anymore. She made herself follow the basic numbers a person needed to be a person, not just a list of tasks: in, out. She counted three. She did it again.

"Do you want to see a doctor?" someone asked, in the cordial voice of organized spaces.

"After I make sure they know what I did to keep it afloat," Liv said. She didn't raise her chin. She didn't make it a speech. She just made sure the sentence landed in a place where it would get carried to the person who would make the next decision about the hatch.

Sophie had the log open on her knees already, pencil set across the spine. She slid it toward the man with the headset. "It's all there. We didn't make it better."

He took it like a person who understood the value of the thing and the limits of what paper could solve. "We'll read it."

The freighter moved. Not the kind of movement that threw a person. Smooth, economical. The change in pitch ran up through Liv's feet and into her chest. She put her hand flat on the rail and steadied there.

"Thank you," Sophie said into the space beside her, not to any one person. It was the kind of thank you that made clear it wasn't payment, and it wasn't surrender, and it wasn't going to be cheap later. The people around them accepted it without saying the phrases organized spaces say back.

The fog thinned. The promise of blue didn't arrive. It didn't need to. The deck felt indecently bright after the cabin. Liv didn't squint. She let her eyes water until they adjusted. She didn't tell anyone the reason for either.

Someone put a cup in her hand that was warm and made of a material that didn't taste like tin. She looked at it and didn't drink yet because she had kept rules too long to break them without a new count. "Is there a record of fuel?" she asked, because her mind hadn't stopped looking for ledgers to set itself against. The man with the headset smiled with his eyes and said they'd deal with fuel later. She nodded and didn't push. She let the cup sit warm against her fingers and didn't put her mouth to it.

Below, the boat rode the freighter's line and steadied. The plate inside held. The pump kept its cadence for another few counts. The hatch stayed

shut. That line was going to have to stand up in rooms where people wore clean jackets and wrote things down with pens that didn't skip.

Liv put her hand on Sophie's shoulder once, to anchor herself to something that had been inside the bad room with her. Sophie leaned into it without flinching. Rhea closed her eyes. Someone adjusted her blanket by an inch. The freighter's engine filled the world.

The next hour, or the next minute, the deck had its own time, nothing dramatic happened on the edge of the deck that looked down on where they had been. That absence of drama wasn't peace. It was a pause with a cost they all knew.

Liv didn't ask for more noise. She didn't need it. She stood in the new sound and let it carry the work for a while. She let the mismatch sit and stayed quiet.

# Chapter 14

## Cost

Sun hit the dried salt on the collars of their jackets and lifted hard points off the rail. The deck had been washed early; the cleaner smell sat under the heavier oil. The brightness was hard on skin used to the dim below. Wrong or not, it was morning.

Liv stood where the rail made a clean corner and let the freighter's engine hum carry through her hands. The line astern held steady tension. Calyptra rode behind them, a shape swallowed and returned by the haze, steady on the tow without asking for a hand. The hatch that mattered was out of reach, and that was the point.

Sophie had found a place against a bulkhead where the wind didn't catch her pages. A mate had given her a lined pad and a pen that wrote without skipping. She'd written their names at the top because that was the first thing that had to exist on paper. Liv read the names and did not correct the order.

Sophie's hand made one small error at the second letter in 'Markovic', corrected once, then ran clean. The pen shook a single time and stopped.

Rhea slept in a corner under a blanket that smelled like a room where nothing went to mildew. Her leg sat propped on folded gear and a cushion set by someone who had done this before. Her breath had a catch at the top of the inhale that did not change across three counts. Loud in the wrong way, and right because it was there.

A door to cold storage stood open further down the deck. Metal racks inside held their cases in a tight stack, clamps taped, labels dry for the

first time in a day. Liv looked at them and registered nothing. Not pride for having carried them. Not relief. Her shoulders didn't drop. There was no response in her chest. She noted it and kept her hands still.

A mate with a headset around his neck stepped into the corner of her sight. He didn't crowd her. He looked between Liv and Sophie and then to the tow. He had a clipboard he hadn't written on yet. When he spoke, he kept his voice in the place work required.

"We'll need a statement," he said. "Sequence. Times if you have them. Headline facts are fine for now."

Liv nodded once. She didn't ask him where it would live later.

"Departure: morning. Outside track," she said, keeping it spare. "We left the epoxy kit ashore for speed. Fog set in. Midnight watch: collision with a container. Engine cut, drift and immediate damage control. First wedge pack seated after a hold. Controlled aft flooding after dawn to correct trim. Under-hull canvas set and held through lifts. Squall later peeled it away. We cannibalized the desal unit and built an interior plate. We seated from inside the flooded compartment. Hatch sealed. No 'Set' given from inside. We held it sealed. Drifted. Flare burned to signal. Your answer flare returned. Transfer executed in your lee. Ice-core cases up before me. Survivors to your deck. Aft compartment remains sealed on my word."

He wrote as she spoke; he didn't ask for embellishment.

"Times of day?" he asked.

She looked at Sophie. Sophie turned a page over and put down marks.

"Departure: morning." Sophie didn't look up. "Collision: after midnight. Wedge seated: near dawn. Flood: after dawn. Canvas: later morning. Peel: afternoon during squall. Plate staged before dusk. Seated and sealed: after dark. Drift until light. Flare on steady echo. Transfer: minutes after answer."

He ticked down the column.

“Injuries?”

“Rhea Reed, leg fracture from stores crate. Ilya Markovic, internal injury following impact. He died hours after the seal held. Kai Mensah sealed inside the patch. He did not return a ‘Set.’” She did not add a sentence after any of those clauses. He kept writing the way a person wrote when controlled sentences were the norm.

“Fuel?” he asked.

“We did not keep a precise line during drift. We applied throttle in short counts for bias toward traffic. I asked for your record.”

“We’ll have it for you,” he said. He tapped the edge of the clipboard against the rail once and let it rest.

Sophie wrote names again on a new line and began a list under the heading she put there without asking:

#### NAMES & DECISIONS

Liv watched the words arrive: Liv Arvidsen. Ilya Markovic. Sophie Leclerc. Rhea Reed. Kai Mensah. Below the names, she saw a gap before the first decision. Sophie waited for Liv to give her the order of it.

“We’ll get to that in a minute,” Liv said softly. She moved to Rhea’s bench and eased the blanket an inch higher without touching the splint. Rhea’s face was grayer than the blanket’s weave. The corner of her mouth had dried salt at it. Liv saw to the small things because the large ones were out of hand for the moment.

The mate waited. He didn’t press. Out on the tow line, Calyptra dipped through a patch of thinner haze and then was gone again. The freighter’s deck under Liv’s boots was steady in the way of big ships.

Liv recognized a cup in her hand again. Someone had passed it there without requiring her attention. She let the warmth sit against her fingers and kept it there. She had kept rules for hours. She wasn’t ready to stop

keeping them because the room was brighter now.

She looked again at the open cold-storage door. The cases sat still. Counting the clamps would not save anything, but input that obeyed orders helped. Four clamps each, tape sealed the corners. Thermometer ports showed numbers that sat in a band Rhea had marked weeks ago. Liv read the numbers and waited for something to move in her chest and nothing did. She accepted the information.

Sophie's pen made a small, impatient lift. It wasn't for Liv; it was for the work. Liv returned to her side without hurry. The mate stepped back and let the corner be theirs.

"We'll do it now," Liv said.

Sophie set the pen at the margin and waited for the first verb.

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They took the corner of the deck as a room. The tow line ended their horizon neatly. The engine's hum asked them not to raise their voices.

"Epoxy kit removed," Liv said. The pen moved.

"Wedge made: clinometer smear at three degrees." The pen moved again.

"Flood ordered: hatch wheel teeth against the palm."

"Tarp set: rope-burn." Sophie's jaw tightened on 'tarp'. She wrote the word anyway.

"Tarp lost."

"Desal sacrificed: metal burrs."

"Hatch sealed." Liv's fingers tightened on the pad edge.

Sophie did not look up in the pauses. She did not fill them. She wrote each verb as it was given, no qualifiers. The lines stacked on the page with

a space between them as if each wanted air.

“That’s the sequence we say when they ask,” Liv said.

Sophie underlined nothing. She put a dot beside ‘Desal sacrificed’ and then set the pen down across the spine.

“We didn’t name the desal in the ship’s log,” she said, voice thin but steady.

“We’re saying it now,” Liv said.

Rhea’s eyes opened as if the hinge in her lids had a catch. She blinked twice and found them. The breath catch at the top of her inhale returned, then smoothed. She saw the pad and the verbs. She swallowed and then asked it without ceremony.

“Do you regret it?”

Liv kept her hands still where Rhea could see them. She let the new air on the deck find her chest and made room for both parts of the answer.

“Yes,” she said. “And it was necessary. Those are not enemies. I’ll carry both.”

Rhea’s jaw loosened a millimeter. Some tension left her throat. She closed her eyes again for a beat and then opened them because sleep on a deck didn’t hold you the way sleep in a proper room would.

“Don’t dress it for me,” she said.

“I’m done dressing anything,” Liv answered.

The first officer appeared at the edge of their chosen corner. He had a kind face and the kind of posture that said he had practice telling people they’d done well. He folded his hands politely and started the sentence anyway because that was his job.

“I just want to say you, ”

“Please don’t,” Liv said, not unkindly. She met his eyes to soften the refusal and made sure there was nowhere for the sentence to go.

He stopped where she asked him to. The look he gave back acknowledged that some rooms didn’t fit that phrase. He nodded and took a half-step away to show he had heard the boundary.

The first officer addressed the work instead.

“We’re holding her on a short tow, Dr. Arvidsen,” he said, formal to keep from bumping anything human. “We won’t open what you shut. We’ll keep you informed.”

“Thank you,” Liv said. She made the words work for logistics and not for comfort. He went on his way and didn’t look back to try again.

Sophie brought the pen back to her hand as if nothing had happened. Her fingers had new color in them that hadn’t been there on the small boat. She turned the pad so the margin sat clear again and waited for the next thing that had to be on paper.

Liv said a name without dressing it.

“Kai Mensah.”

Sophie’s pen hovered, then settled to the page.

No one added a clause. Sophie wrote the name alone on its line and did not attach an explanation. She left a clean space after it. The silence that followed wasn’t empty. It did not ask to be filled.

Rhea watched Liv.

“He volunteered,” Rhea said, not to decorate it but to keep the ledger honest.

“He did,” Liv said.

“And you kept the hatch shut,” Sophie said. She set that one down hard and did not flinch after she said it.

“I did,” Liv said. She kept her mouth steady around the words.

“On what words,” Sophie asked. Her hand hovered above the paper because record mattered.

“On his ‘Shut,’” Liv said. “And on the fact that ‘Set’ did not come. We agreed not to open for any sound. We held to it.”

Sophie wrote:

Hatch sealed on ‘Shut’. No ‘Set’ given. Not opened.

She added, in the smallest letters she could make while keeping them legible: On my word only.

“When we speak to anyone official,” Liv said, “we say it in those words. We do not change the names of anything we did. We do not call ‘holding’ by any other name. We do not call anything ‘mercy.’”

Rhea’s eyes didn’t move from Liv’s face. She held that look as if she were testing it for cracks.

“We also tell them the speed was mine,” she said, and her voice came thin through a dry throat.

“Yes,” Liv said. “We say it in those words. ‘No donor forced speed’ as I said to you. That stays.”

Sophie drew a line across the page to mark the boundary between decision and commentary. She wrote under it with the care of someone who had learned not to waste ink:

No donor forced speed. My decision.

She didn’t mark the pronoun as Liv’s; it didn’t need that.

“We keep the survival numbers accurate,” Sophie added, her eyes meeting Liv’s before she put down the sentence. “One-fifty every eight. No exceptions. Heater stays. No tea.”

Liv nodded.

“You write them exactly,” she said.

Sophie did, and didn’t put a single underline next to any of it.

Rhea's hand shifted under the blanket until it touched the bench. She let her palm rest on the wood and kept it there.

"They'll ask if we called," she said.

"We did," Sophie answered, looking to Liv for permission to speak to that part. Liv nodded once.

"We called on a schedule and received nothing but noise and a tone we could not trace. We logged 'No joy.' We don't make it sound better later."

Liv kept her hands folded on the rail for a breath and then let them come down to her sides.

"When they ask about the man who died after," Rhea said, meaning Ilya without saying his name so it wouldn't stick her throat today, "we say 'died' and not anything else."

"We say 'died'," Liv said. Her mouth almost opened for the other word. She closed it again and left it there.

Sophie wrote:

Ilya Markovic: died after the seal held.

She left a small square of space open beside it as if she might stick a date in later if someone asked for it. She did not fill it now.

"We put this in their hands when they ask," Sophie said, touching the page.

"We do," Liv said.

Sophie rested the pen on the pad again without closing it. She glanced at the cold-storage door and then away.

"The cores will go where they are supposed to go," Rhea said. Her voice was steady around it because the thing had become a smaller detail in the scale of the room, and also because she was the one who had always guarded those cases.

“They will,” Liv said. She left it there. The ledger wasn’t for weighing the value of ice against the value of breath today. The ledger had already been paid.

The wind shifted a fraction. The freighter’s air changed color without changing light. Clean steel gave her boots nothing to catch. Liv did not mistake the surface for a cure. She was too old for that and too tired.

The mate came back once to ask if they needed anything right now. Sophie asked for more blank paper and for a small piece of tape. He left and returned with both. Sophie used the tape to hold the top edge of the page against the bulkhead so it wouldn’t try to fold itself in the wind. The scrap of tape sat across the top like a small bandage that had learned its job in another room.

She wrote again:

We will not change words later.

She put a dot under it and let the pen rest.

No one said the usual things about being lucky. The deck didn’t ask for that kind of talk, and Liv wouldn’t allow it.

The tow line creaked once.

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She went to the rail because a person needed to see the problem entire once in a while. Calyptra lay astern at the end of the line, small against open water. The tow sat clean in the water. The seal held. No new trickle in the freighter’s wake told on them. The sun through haze made the sea another gray instead of the gray it had been, and Liv ignored the trick her eyes wanted to play.

Her palm stayed on the cold rail and let the new steadiness travel up the bones of her arm. She thought of the hatch and didn’t open the door in her head. The urge came; she refused it. She had made the decision

there. The cost had been collected. Thinking about angles and hands and studs and bolts again would not bring the word 'Set' up out of the water or put Kai on a deck.

She ran the survival ledger through once more without looking for a place to put it down. Liters. Calories. Minutes. Each had been set and kept until they weren't hers to keep. She updated a different ledger next to it because her mind did that kind of work even when she wished it wouldn't.

Kai, gone.

Ilya, gone.

There wasn't a number she could put on that line and have it behave. The line stayed open in a way that didn't fit old columns. She accepted that it would never close and that carrying it was part of the job they gave her and that she took in pieces she shouldn't have.

She pictured the epoxy kit in its dented case. She pictured lifting it back onto a shelf where it would sit like any other piece of gear that might be used again. That act was not available. The picture wasn't a comfort. It was a sentence she would keep serving in how she spoke about this day to anyone who asked.

The wind dried the salt at the corners of her mouth. It stung a little and then it didn't. She closed her mouth around the promise and kept it, even if it cost her.

A deckhand paid out a little more tow line under a sign from above. He didn't look down at her because he didn't need to; his job was the line, not her. She appreciated people who did their chores without making it personal. The freighter started a slow turn that brought a different edge into view. The hum under the rail changed pitch. Calyptra adjusted to the new habit without sending any complaint up the line.

Liv let her hand fall from the rail. She turned back to the corner where Rhea's blanket sat and Sophie's page was taped. Work waited

there, of the kind that did not make noise and still had to be done. She crossed the deck without making a weight of each step.

Sophie shifted to make space for her to sit on the crate. She set the pen in the binding so she could use both hands to coax the corner of the tape up and lay it down again; the breeze had lifted it. She did it calmly. Rhea watched the small repair, eyes following the motion with the intensity of someone who had been taught by pain to narrow focus to what could be changed.

“They’re going to want you in a room later,” Sophie said without looking up.

“I’ll go,” Liv said. “And we’ll go in together for the parts that belong to all of us.”

“They’ll try to use the word ‘heroic,’” Rhea said. Her voice had regained an edge of dry humor that wasn’t kind to anyone.

“We’ll give them the ledger,” Liv said. “We’ll hand them the ledger and leave the sums as they stand.”

Sophie reached up and ran her thumb along the dry corner of her own mouth as if adjusting her face back into its usual state.

“Do you want me to call your mother?” she asked suddenly. It was a question that didn’t belong to any list and still mattered.

“After the room,” Liv said. “I want her to hear it clean. Not in pieces.”

Sophie nodded. She accepted that as an order with a human shape.

“What about Kai’s people,” Rhea asked. Her eyes had a heat in them that wasn’t strictly fever.

“We don’t get to choose the way that news goes,” Liv said. She kept her voice low and steady. “We can insist on the words that go with it. We can insist on the truth of what he did and that we didn’t open after we agreed not to.”

Sophie put the pen back down as if it had weight she wasn't going to make it carry in this second. She looked at Liv and Rhea in turn.

"Then that's what we do," she said.

The freighter started a slow vibration that told on a change of speed. The sound got into their bones and reorganized their hearts for a second, then settled. The bright spots on the rail moved with the turn and came to rest in a new pattern.

Liv let the breath go out of her chest and took the next one in. The steady rhythm held; her body kept it.

She placed her hand on the edge of the pad and pushed it a finger's width so the tape could lay flat. The corner of Sophie's mouth tightened. Rhea closed her eyes again and did not sleep; she rested without falling, which was the only kind their bodies knew how to do right now. The hum carried them forward. The tow held. The taped page stayed flat.