

THERMOCLINE



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Thermocline

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Chapter 1

The Flexing Roof

A low groan came through the ice before the water changed. It rolled in a regular band of sound, not a creak, cleaner, deeper, hard to place at first, the sort of tone that travelled the bones before it hit the ear. Elise matched her breathing to it, counting in eights under the hiss of her regulator and keeping the pace steady over the grain of glacial silt that rasped her gloves. Eight. Exhale. Eight. Exhale.

Her lamp made a cone of visibility about two and a half metres wide, and the ridge lay as a narrow contour inside it. Where her beam cut the water there was green and a scatter of suspended fines. Outside the cone there was pressure and more ice. She laid the first current sensor where the ridge lip sharpened, left hand braced against rock while the right pushed the clamp home. Bolt snap. Tug-check. The unit's tiny diode pulsed red then settled to green. She let it run against her palm for a second to synchronise clocks.

Marta slid into position without rubbing the ceiling. Low profile. Nothing excess to catch on brine icicles, brittle and dangerous, some clear, some cloudy where salts caught light. Marta held up two fingers and a palm. Two metres and a half to the next mount. She had pre-empted the spacing call. Elise dipped her lamp in acknowledgment and shifted half a metre to match. Marta's lamp cone held exactly there and no farther.

Kiran edged closer with the instrument case. He overreached with his fins, a small puff off the floor that made the fines lift, and Elise pivoted her beam to blind him briefly. Slow. He checked himself and held the case steady while she pulled the second sensor free and settled it. The clamp

wobbled; he was holding his end light. She let him feel it. The move anchored his wrists and the wobble went out. His breath rate ticked up for a handful of cycles and eased back under her metronome.

Another groan rolled the ice. Eight seconds to the next. The roof flexed with the tide in regular pulses; the interval was consistent. She let the sound run up her neck and into her jaw. Exhale on seven to avoid the push of CO₂, hold the last beat for control.

They worked along the ridge in measured placement, five units over twenty-seven metres, light cones trading the line and the shadows of their bodies. The guideline stayed coiled on Marta's harness, a safety they hadn't needed on this straight, clean lip with roughly three body-lengths of visibility. That was before the wind. She sensed it as a pressure shift more than a sound, an alteration in the roof's reverb, then a tremor through the brine icicles that clicked quietly against each other. The change transmitted into the water. Elise lifted her beam. No head movement. She moved her lamp and read the underside of the roof. A dim shake ran along a pocket. The pressure lowered a fraction, and the water cooled at her cheek, confirming a new inflow from above.

She raised her fist and held it. Marta's light met hers, steadied. Kiran's beam tracked too wide and came back after a heartbeat. Elise rolled her wrist and pressed fingers together, tight and quick: exit vulnerable. Her other hand tapped twice for speed. Marta nodded, a short, sharp movement that sent no silt. Kiran signalled OK, the circle of thumb and forefinger just a touch slow.

The tether line from the surface hung two body lengths to their left, a pale rope that was meant to be a quiet vertical, a reference not a leash. It trembled, a low-frequency thrumming transmitted through the rope into her gloves. The unmanned tender rode on air and ice above. She pictured the boat in the hole they'd cut, a steady platform in still conditions. These were not still conditions.

She brought the next sensor home with more force than she liked and had to adjust the angle again. Kiran hovered too close, trying to help with the strap. A tap to his wrist, then the housing: there. He let go. His eyes floated too wide in his mask for a second. He was young and hungry for the work and the praise and there was no praise down here. Only the counters and the numbers and the rhythm of the roof.

The handheld probe on her left clipped against the rock, and she pulled it up to settle it along the flow. Temperature: -1.2°C . A change. She moved it three centimetres, watched the digits flicker, then stabilise at -0.8°C with a slight increase in flow rate. The halocline shimmered around her lamp, its refractive boundary kinked at one edge. Not surface, not ground, just two layers meeting without mixing. Warm for this place. Not warm for skin.

She lifted and re-seated the probe once, then held for a slow eight-count to make sure it wasn't the shadow of her own light. The numbers stayed put. She logged the coordinates on her slate with a pencil that scratched inside its plastic case. Ridge. Warm outflow. Priority waypoint.

"On you," Marta signed with a quick forefinger. Elise answered with a small tilt of her lamp toward the next placement and brought them on. Metal to rock, clamp to lip, tug-check, power. The diode flashed and matched the others, a sparse grid of diodes recording vectors and power budgets.

Battery readouts: Elise's primary 74%. Marta 69%. Kiran 58%. Cylinders: Elise 172 bar. Marta 168. Kiran 161. They were in the black on gas. Plenty for the planned loop and return. Plenty until the wind changed plans from the other side of a metre of ice.

The groan came early. Six counts. Elise felt it in her throat as a tightness that made her swallow. The tender's tether snapped to a new angle and there was a jerk, a clear, single event transferred through rope and water. She looked at Marta. Marta's head was already still. Kiran

flinched and his left fin grazed the floor again. Silt puff. He froze, chastened, and Elise took the last of the calibration data on the fifth sensor without indulging the wish to lock it all down twice. Her fingers touched her valve, a habit. One, two. She moved, and the other two moved with her.

She slotted the pencil back and made the signal for home. Fingers curled to chest, then out. Simple. Kiran's light nodded first. Marta's was already tracking back the way they came. Elise gave the ridge a last look with her lamp, pictures not for memory, for safety: where were the jagged bits; where were the soft shelves; what was the line of easiest water if they had to move faster than the plan's conscious pace.

The pressure wave arrived blunt and wrong. Not a roof groan. The water slid an inch then settled as mass shifted above. A muffled thud came through the ice and the ceiling resonance dipped for a single beat. A brief negative-pressure tug ran down the tether. The tether line lashed; its humming changed register into a swift, cross-grain vibration, then went slack and dropped a fraction, a pale line losing tension, its curve deepening. Light scatter near the ceiling altered around the exit area, a thin, cloudy sheen forming along the rim as frazil began to bind the cut.

Elise flattened her palm and the team stopped. Make the stillness useful, not a freeze. Back to eight. She took the slack in with her eyes only. The line had been load-bearing overhead a breath before. Now it hung with a fine residual vibration. She didn't climb after it, didn't let Marta or Kiran reach. Slack line. Entanglement.

She felt the water cool further around her jaw where the hood was thinnest. The roof acoustics changed. A pocket vented irregularly somewhere to their right as trapped air disturbed brine, and then the faint knock of something solid against ice came through, transmitted and

softened by depth. The exit was no longer an exit. The tender had gone on its back or its side, dragging the buoy down, pulling the vertical marking and the calm patch at the cut into the water with it.

Marta reached sideways and pinched the tether with two fingers. It was live, moving with a pull that belonged to momentum, not an anchored mooring. She let go in the same motion and turned back, breath going out too hard for one cycle. The next was in control.

Kiran's lamp was not on the line or on Elise. It was on a small, bright thing that bobbed away near the ceiling, trapped between two brine icicles. A marker float. Easy to grab. Easy to lose more than time for. He pushed toward it. Elise reached his harness and locked him still with a firm grip. She swung her lamp hard into his mask. On me. Formation. He froze and then nodded small. The float moved off, a negligible asset trading out into a darker corridor where visibility fell to under two metres.

Fine silt descended from the roof, a steady fall that turned their beams to short ranges. Elise lifted her left arm so the slate and probe acted as a shield for her face and read the water in its broken lengths. The ice groaned again and the sound dropped in frequency and lengthened. The tether line slid further and vanished in darkness. Whatever was above them was now entirely below them.

A nearby pocket collapsed with a muffled thump and a clear flow of brine, and the roof came down a finger's width in that spot, the icicles jolting to new angles. Elise tested the space above her shoulders with a careful lift. She had room. They all did. For now.

Decision. She held her light low and drew the shape of the ridge on the slate with the wet pencil, marked the warm outflow point from minutes before, then put the point of her glove at that line and then forward. She made the sign for the tether, two fingers together followed by a cutting gesture, then a flat palm away. Leave it. Ridge. Marta answered with a crisp OK and the quick, functional tilt of her lamp to

their new bearing. Kiran gave OK slower, breath clouding his mask at the top; he leaned forward unconsciously, wanting to move. Good. Movement now was the right instinct.

Elise checked numbers. Battery: Elise 71%. Marta 66%. Kiran 54%. Gas: Elise 161 bar; Marta 158; Kiran 149. At their current rates and depth they had time, but not to spend. She put her cheek to the flow for a heartbeat out of habit and then took it away. The water there held a faint, measurable change at the skin consistent with the warmer layer they had recorded. She did not navigate by that; the probe would do it. She wasn't going to make this dive into a test of nerve against physics.

They turned their bodies together and left the dead exit behind. She set a survival ledger in her head: lamp burn at these percentages, gas at these pressures, the tide moving toward a peak that would press the roof flatter, pockets shrinking, brine channels narrowing with their own ice. She kept the count. Eight. Eight. Eight.

The ridge lip made good travel. It offered a clean edge and fewer places to pick up a fatal snag. They kept off the floor and kept their fins high. The silt thinned as they moved away from the collapsed pocket, and the water cleared enough to see three body lengths, roughly five metres. Elise read the halocline: stable sheets, occasional ripples. She held them at two metres spacing and adjusted Kiran to the back where less decision-making would save him oxygen. He expended effort in small ways, overcorrections, tiny accelerations to close gaps. Nothing that couldn't be coached back into line.

Beneath them the ridge dropped into a moraine gully that had caught decades of fines. Any rushed kick would silt it out. She drifted over it with as little thigh as possible, core doing the work. Marta's trim was textbook, the line of her body clean and soft. The low-profile rig she'd insisted on bringing paid out here: there would be nothing to catch on brine icicles or the tight corners of a pressure-formed roof. Elise didn't need to admire that; she needed to use it. She flicked her lamp across Marta's shoulder when the spacing was perfect, a brief arc to mark alignment.

Behind, Kiran hit a patch of denser water and lifted too hard, bounced off a ripple, and steadied. His left hand was slow on his inflator. Elise tracked it and then let it go. He was still inside safety. She could feel his breath rate through the perturbed water. He took an extra second to settle it on his own and did. Good.

They threaded the ridge until it met a dark tongue of channeling, moved through it single-file, then found a shoulder out of current where the roof lifted a fraction. Depth eased by about a metre and the flow set left to right along the lip, funnelling into a moraine notch. She held a palm. Halt.

The moraine notch had different acoustics. The roof's groans came in as a muffled pressure and rebounded less. Elise felt the reduced load against her ribs and used the pause for structure.

She lifted her slate and wrote large for clarity. 3 DIVERS. She tapped each of them with a gloved knuckle. 6 TANKS. She tapped each cylinder, back mounts here and a single stage apiece, counting with exaggerated movement and a pause on every number. 4 LAMPS. Three primaries plus the extra backup Marta carried inboard on her chest. She lit the tape marks on each handle to show the same information in three channels: numbers, touch, light.

Marta brought her lamp in and held it against the palm of her glove. The beam shortened as battery output fell in the cold. She turned the wrist computer so Elise could see: 66% burn remaining at current output. She flattened the cone to the notch wall and showed its range, a truncated ellipse. She pointed to Kiran's lamp. He lifted it; its spill was uneven. His number read 48% now, not great, not catastrophic. She pinched fingers for narrow beam. Elise's was 70%. Four lamps, one at risk of dipping below functional range first.

Gas checks again: Elise 152. Marta 150. Kiran 141. She put the numbers on the slate and added a simple subtraction line out to a stage-switch threshold if need be. Kiran's eyes locked on the numbers. They were the world right now.

A low vibration ran under her hands when she rested them on the notch's rock. The water trembled. At first she read it as roof, then discarded that. Downstream hum, low-frequency and constant. Something larger, a broader channel, lay ahead. Good water. She pointed in its direction and drew an arrow on the slate, then a small square for waypoint. Useful map for minds under load.

She drew the ridge line simply, a curve with the warm outflow marked by a small temperature symbol. Next to it: -0.8°C . She added an arrow along the ridge pointing toward depth shallowing and the hum's source. She pointed at the arrow, then at each of their chests, then ahead. Plan.

Rest protocol: She wrote 20' with a circle and an arrow pointing at the roof pockets. She made a roof shape with her hands and then the squeeze gesture: only if safe. Marta made the OK signal small. Kiran mirrored it but took a second to flex his fingers inside his gloves. Elise watched the movement, slow and deliberate. He pressed the glove and the fingertips gave back almost nothing; the squeeze lagged between intention and motion. A small pulse of fog lingered at the top edge of his mask for a beat before it cleared. He made himself look at her again and held still. Good. He knew what he was dealing with.

She angled her cheek to the water where the notch funnelled edge flow and felt a brief, less-cold band. She checked the reading and it agreed with her skin. The ridge was a vector you could believe in.

She tapped the slate. EIGHTEEN HRS. FLAT ROOF. No diagrams. Just the line and the number. Marta held the light on it without comment. Kiran's shoulders shifted at the clear deadline.

“On you,” Marta signed again, economical. Elise clipped the slate back. She took one more check of the notch’s ceiling, a good hand’s width above her head where she was, and watched a faint dust of silt drift from some distance event. Not here. Elsewhere. Time moving. She didn’t want to talk about luck, not here, not ever. Conditions were what they were; move within them or stop.

She led them out, up along the ridge line, keeping the light low so it reflected off rock and silt instead of the roof. The hum strengthened a shade. The water tasted metal at the hard end of her exhale. CO₂ creep, not a problem yet, a prompt to spend breaks wisely.

On the lip, brine icicles hung thinner now, some broken in blunt stubs where earlier flex had sheared them. Marta paced to preserve her lamp. She made small adjustments to formation when the gully dropped away and the ridge angled them into a bend. Behind, Kiran kept tight and copied the moves, only once lifting too much air into his suit before bleeding it out. He checked his hands between actions with small test flexes, movements cautious.

The ridge became their line of intent, clear enough to hold while conditions forced other recalculations on top. Elise counted in eights to keep herself precise. She sent a brief pulse with her lamp across Marta’s glove for alignment and saw the answering flash, felt that small exhale of a team in the proper state. Not relief. Something functional and better: readiness repeatable on demand.

A broader darkness opened ahead, less wall, more space. The hum was audible now even through the hood. She slowed them proportionally so they wouldn’t fly into it with the wrong momentum and put a palm down as the first edge of it arrived. The ice above produced a deeper, colder sound as load shifted overhead. The water felt slightly less cold against her cheek; the probe reading rose by 0.1°C.

She thought of the exit they had left, a hole now skinning over under katabatic wind, marked by rope that no longer marked anything a human

could use. Some routes closed behind you. That was inventory. Her internal list updated: batteries, gas, distance, body temperatures, roof behaviour, team state. They followed the ridge and kept to the numbers.

Elise Nygaard kept the lamp steady and set her cheek briefly to the edge flow out of habit. Then she set her face forward and pulled the water past her palms, counting in eights together with the roof's next low groan as the fjord flexed again. Ahead, the downstream hum increased in amplitude and the halocline ripples tightened to roughly thirty centimetres.

Chapter 2

Lost Line

The groan arrived wrong and then the water moved sideways. Elise felt it through forearms and slate before she saw it. The fines lifted and moved across their lamps; backscatter cut range to less than an arm's length. Her regulator hissed steady. She kept the count. Eight. Exhale on seven. The second exhale hit metallic in the mouthpiece.

She brought them in with a flat palm. Huddle. Shoulders touched. Marta's rig presented clean surfaces; nothing protruded. Kiran's suit creaked when he tried to settle his feet. Silt came thick, not a cloud, a dense layer. She turned her lamp to her glove and left it there, making a panel of light they could use without backscatter. When visibility goes, turn the light into an object.

Fan. She drew it on the slate: a small wedge and three short arrows. She pressed the pencil hard enough for the scratch to carry through water to the bones. They eased the formation open by a hand's width only, lamps angled low, fingers hooked into each other's harness webbing. A controlled sweep. Right then left. No one let go of fabric.

A short knock transmitted through the ice into the water. Not near. A pocket failing somewhere ahead. The roof groaned again, deeper, and the water around their heads felt heavier. She brought her cheek to the flow and took it away fast so she didn't train herself to trust skin in a whiteout. The probe read -0.9°C when she moved it to her left. On the right, -1.1°C . The numbers confirmed the earlier vector: warmer to port.

Marta flashed her beam in a tight slice and cut it left, then held it steady at a fuzzy darkness. A ridge shadow, maybe the lip they had tracked before the plume. She gave the signal for a more aggressive move,

two fingers, quick and insistent. Elise held her lamp to Marta's and didn't move for two beats. Kiran's breath lifted too loud into the small space the three bodies made. Eight. Exhale on seven. Elise made the slow-down sign, then a small OK. Marta adjusted the angle to show she had understood: bolder, but with the formation intact.

The silt dropped in an uneven fall, clearing from waist to knee faster than at head height. Kiran's lamp found a pale pane of rock and then lost it when fines rolled back. He misread Elise's sweep-width sign, unhooked too far and drifted one metre to starboard. Tight water. A back eddy took him further by half a palm. Elise grabbed the near strap on his harness and hauled him in. Not violent. Certain. Her arm registered the drag, a value to subtract.

The roof groaned in a lower band. The groan lengthened and the gap between pulses changed. It slipped from a steady six-count to uneven by half a beat. Cold touched the upper airway through the regulator, different to liquid cold. The beams flattened and didn't reach. She went to slate because words weren't possible and hand signs in this were slow, drew the ridge in two lines, marked the warm outflow symbol as before, then crossed out the old return arrow toward the entry hole. Elise pressed the tip hard on the warm arrow and held it. Marta's lamp fixed on it. Kiran's followed late but fixed.

She capped it with: 3 D / 6 T / 4 L, underlined the four and made a small box around it, not because they had plenty, because the count mattered if it changed. Then she added EIGHTEEN HRS in the corner so the number stayed visible to all three. Marta didn't need it. Kiran did.

Kiran's breathing rate climbed again. Rapid bubbles came off the edges of his mask. Elise put her left palm on his shoulder and deliberately compressed her own breath. Eight beats, slow. She overdid the exhale on seven and emptied to the last beat to show control. The next sequence with him was better. Not good. Better.

They let the fan collapse and swam into Marta's shadow. The ridge came back into view by increments. Edges made sense. The water had a little more structure. The hum under everything resolved into a low band at the edge of hearing. Elise moved them with her hand to hold two metres of spacing again and aimed her lamp through Marta, not around her, so the cones didn't blind.

Numbers. She checked when the silt fell enough to read faces. Battery: Elise 64%. Marta 61%. Kiran 45%. Gas: Elise 145 bar. Marta 143. Kiran 134. She logged them on the slate with small, dark strokes and kept the slate in her peripheral field. The silt storm had forced cost with nothing gained but alignment. That's what it cost.

The ridge lip became a narrow, workable path again. They moved with elbows tucked, fins high, trim good enough to not force more silt than the water did on its own. The hum under the ridge went up a fraction. Elise let it inform speed, not direction.

*** With Kiran's battery at 45%, she kept lamp arcs low and spacing tight.

Marta wanted speed. It came off her in the way she angled her body into the small cross current and how her fin tips lifted, the minimal energy going into forward motion instead of trim. Elise let it happen inside limits. She drew a smaller triangle on the slate and placed it in front of Marta's mask: closer spacing. Then she pointed at Marta's chest, then ahead, then made a small circle with her forefinger: keep momentum, but keep the cage.

They accelerated by a margin you could feel in the lift off the palms. Fines along the floor slithered backwards faster. Elise could have reined it in. She didn't. She kept the count and measured the cost against distance gained with each exhale.

A pulse of colder water slid in from starboard and touched the right side of her jaw where the hood was thinnest. She put the probe into it. Temperature dropped two tenths to -1.1°C and the flow line kinked. She

held it for three seconds, then pulled it across to port again. -0.9°C . The warm lens remained. She angled her cheek to port and let the warmer layer touch skin a second longer than she liked to be sure she wasn't reading her own exhale. Warmer held. She kept the probe flat to read flow without losing the ridge's shape.

She lifted the slate and wrote the numbers. -1.1°C \square starboard (reject). -0.9°C \square port (hold). She didn't add commentary. She pointed at Marta and the left-hand lens. Marta's first lamplight showed a small resistance to ignoring the cold draw, then she turned her hand palm-up and let it fall in a brief OK. The alignment left no argument. Elise matched it.

Kiran signalled the wiggle for finger numbness, then flattened his hand and opened and closed the fist twice. She put him in the middle without a pause: she touched Marta's elbow and drew Kiran into the slot, then moved herself to tail. Cage formation. Her lamp went to half to avoid backscatter in Marta's beam while keeping Kiran's shoulders lit. Kiran moved with the control of someone working at the edge of what he could do. He kept the bubbles steady for four full eight-counts before another small spike came. Cold ran decision-making, then breath, then hands. Keep him between.

The ridge slipped them onto a tongue of fine sediment. She read it as soft, not with eyes, with the way the water gave at the touch of one gloved knuckle to check. It avalanched slowly when Marta's fin wake touched it. The fines slid down the tongue and boiled up around their thighs. Visibility shrank again. Marta didn't deviate. She held course and made the forward-only sign. Elise answered with a practical OK and kept close. If they stopped here to wait for clarity it would cost time and give back nothing but air thick with silt.

Something small on Kiran's right hip hit an edge and cracked. The noise was sharp and out of place in the water. Elise saw a fragment spin once in the beams and disappear into the sediment. A plastic accessory clip had failed. His backup spool remained attached by the primary

boltsnap, but the loose line of webbing from the broken clip floated free for a second. She pressed it flat against his suit and looped it under the hip strap in one move. It would hold against casual bumps. It wouldn't hold against a pull. Note that.

Battery drift took another step. They reached a small shelf where the avalanche finished moving and the water settled enough for numbers. Elise angled her light to her wrist and read the tiny digits. Her primary: 61%. Marta's: 48%. Kiran's: 42%. Two under fifty. She put the figures on the slate and travelled with it out, visible. The cones in front of them were shorter. Marta narrowed her beam to gain throw and lost width. Kiran's had an uneven edge that worried her; she watched it more than the numbers.

The water in front rippled without mixing. Not the silt. The halocline. It formed ropy sheets that distorted the beams and made hands distort when they crossed layers. Elise approached on the right-hand side of one ribbon and put her cheek to it. Warmth was too big a word. Less cold. Enough to name. She tracked the undulating edge with the probe and got the number she needed: -0.8°C when aligned along the lens axis. The warmer lens formed a band a little above the ridge lip. She lifted the slate, marked a simple curve labelled LENS and drew the arrow through it.

Marta's chin dipped once. She moved into it with her shoulders on the right angle. Tactical friction eased. The alignment held. They slid along the warmer band and the hum grew in their chests and in their ears. It wasn't a sound that gave comfort. It was a coordinate.

They followed it, and the ridge fell away in thin steps. The roof above showed new icicles, shorter, thicker, the kind that held until they sheared. The water ahead felt shaped, not open.

Gas check while the ropy veil smoothed into sheets. Elise: 139 bar. Marta: 137. Kiran: 128. She wrote the numbers without a frame around them and felt that omission in her own hand. Frame them later if they moved again. Don't spend the hand now.

*** Gas sat at 139/137/128 with the warmer lens holding; she kept the cage tight and stayed in the band.

The channel tightened where the warmer band squeezed between two bulges of roof. Kiran's right glove scraped a protrusion. It wasn't forceful. It didn't need to be. His lamp mount had been slow to respond to cold and the clamp had slipped a millimetre since the last check. The scrape torqued the mount. The lamp popped sideways, hit the rock once, and fell.

Elise swung her beam down. It rotated as it dropped, beam spinning in the silt in a torn spiral. The fines rose and buried it. One second of light spiralling, then nothing. She held still so her breath didn't go hard and short. Kiran's bubbles stuttered twice. He reached into the silt. There wasn't anything. He stilled his hands for an eight-count, then the next breath steadied.

Marta compacted, jaw set, shoulders tight. She sliced a hand through the water and let it hang there for a beat. Elise put her palm out flat between Marta and Kiran, lamp steady on her glove. Action, not argument. She reached across to Marta's chest where the inboard spare sat for this exact problem. Marta unclipped it with one clean movement and slapped it into Elise's hand. Elise seated it on Kiran's strap and locked it. She gave the light two short pulses to confirm. The beam came on and held but with a slightly softer throw than a new cell. Good enough. Not great. She lifted the slate, boxed 3 L, and held it for Marta; Marta met her eyes once and returned to the path.

A darker quadrant opened on starboard. She narrowed her beam in that arc and kept the tap cadence steady.

The formation re-formed without talk. Marta's kit was now leaner. Her jaw set in the way it did when she held back a line she wanted to throw. Elise didn't have time for anything but the route. She put their next moves on rhythm: shoulder tap on eight, then again on sixteen, then a pause to keep timing elastic enough to absorb bends. Tactile cadence as

communication. Lamps kept low to avoid wrecking each other's eyes in the narrowed space.

She tested the water for draw. The flow pulled at the glove in a steady tug. She turned her head slightly and let the cheek read it. The draw ran left to right in the warmer lens, accelerating through a constriction. That was the way to go if they wanted a definitive path. Narrow means shape. Shape means less guess.

Kiran's breathing evacuated steadiness and then came back in little steps. Elise tapped his shoulder in the count. Eight. Exhale on seven. Hold the last half-beat to keep the pause stable. His bubbles evened a fraction. The end of the exhale tasted of copper. CO₂. She let it be what it was. She wasn't going to name it a problem yet. Putting words on it would pull attention she needed for route and breath.

Her wrist gave battery digits again when she lifted it. 61% on her primary. Marta's read 42%. Kiran's reassigned spare showed 55%. One under fifty. She shortened lamp arcs and confirmed the tighter taps because one sat under fifty. Two under fifty if Kiran's spare slipped below fifty. Two was the dangerous number. Three after that meant crawling along rock at arm's length. She didn't look ahead to that. She kept the current ones held and moved.

The channel constricted. The halocline that had been ropy became planar, then broke into veils again as the ceiling pressed lower and the floor rose in soft lumps of silted moraine. Brine icicles hung in short, fat clusters, ready to catch webbing or trim. She kept the line reel out of the plan. Using a line here meant false security and a real trap. Marta knew it; she didn't touch the reel on her harness.

They entered the maze proper without a sign but with a set of small facts. Visibility at under two metres bank to bank. Flow increasing through constrictions. Temperature holding in the warmer band at -0.8°C to -0.9°C with cold pulses intersecting it from starboard at intervals. Overhead groans now irregular by a fraction.

Elise drew one more picture on the slate. A fork. One branch angled into darkness with small, flecked silt rising. The other stayed within the warmer lens and bent into the hum. She made a dot at the fork and tapped it twice for emphasis. She didn't pretend the dot was a place to rest.

Gas: Elise 132 bar. Marta 130. Kiran 121. She wrote the numbers and kept her hand on the slate a second longer than needed, because that contact was the only pause the three of them had earned.

They moved again. Shoulder taps on time. Lamps low and narrow. The hum grew just perceptibly. The ceiling flexed. Breath cadence stayed the reliable metric.

The maze constricted around them, narrowing their choices to one at a time.

Chapter 3

Brine Maze

The fork presented itself as a soft change in water. Not a shape. A behaviour. Elise lifted a hand and flattened the team. She held still until her own bubbles cleared, then moved her head by a hand's width into the seam and let the thin skin of her cheek read it. Less cold on the right by a measurable touch. She brought the probe in to confirm because skin lies when cold runs the nerves. -0.9°C right branch. -1.1°C left. Flow felt tighter to the right when she held the probe flat.

She turned the slate and drew it large: Y-fork. Right arm with an arrow and -0.9°C . Left arm with a cross and -1.1°C . She tapped the right and pointed ahead. Marta didn't move. She slid past Elise's hip, checked left for herself, held the probe in the left arm until the number stabilised, then came back with the cold sign and a small OK. No debate. Physics had it.

Kiran angled his hood seam across the right-hand lens and waited. He didn't flinch. After a beat he tried again. He lifted a palm, unsure. His next breath came higher in the chest. He flexed his fingers inside the glove and the movement lagged. Elise brought the probe to his forearm where the suit compressed near the wrist seal and put the tip in the lens. She tapped the number on the display. He followed her finger. His next breath lengthened by a fraction. Not good. Better.

They moved. Right arm of the fork, within the smoother layer. The halocline veils steadied and the beams held shape out to just over two metres. Marta tightened the cage and set shoulder to the established vector, head still, minimal fin. Elise took tail and kept the slate visible off to the side when silt allowed.

Numbers when the water cleared enough for a glance. Battery: Elise 59%. Marta 41%. Kiran 53%. Gas: Elise 129 bar. Marta 127. Kiran 118. She wrote them tight. No boxes. Save the hand.

The roof groaned, migrating laterally across the ceiling with a moving load. It arrived off Elise's eight-count by nearly one beat. She let it pass and held her breath discipline steady. Eight. Exhale on seven. Hold the last half. The clearance above their tanks fell a finger's thickness. Brine icicles flexed and clicked. Urgency reset without drama.

They rounded a low rise. A distinct spine of rock, not tall, sharp at the top and pale along one edge, stood out against the darker silt. She lifted the slate and marked it as a simple long triangle with a notch. CHECK. She fixed it in her head's map as well. Tools fail. She logged it mentally.

The downwash hit without a cue. Dense water dropped out of a pocket to their right and fell through them in a slow curtain. Buoyancy shifted ugly. Elise went to procedure. Wing: two taps in. Suit: one tap. Marta dumped a breath of wing gas to avoid bumping the roof. Kiran rose half a hand before he caught it and then overshot with a dump from the suit that flattened him into the ridge lip.

Elise reached over, clamped his harness webbing above the D-ring, and held him on the count while he found his level. She bled a short hiss from his shoulder dump to stop the slide. Shoulder tap on eight. Again on sixteen. His bubbles steadied by degree. The downwash thinned and moved past them. They had lost nothing but seconds and a layer of control.

The hum under everything grew a touch louder. It wasn't comfort. It was a fixed point. Marta lifted her free hand and aligned it with the sound, a small correction of two degrees only. Elise nodded in the water and set the cage on that new bearing. The halocline shimmered along their arms and made the gloves look bent.

They kept the spacing at two metres and closed to one when the roof folded down. Elise risked a cheek check once more to verify the axis. Less

cold still to the right. She didn't train herself to rely on it. The probe got the last word each time she could spare it.

They swam through a patch of fines mid-water and out the other side into another band where visibility sat just good enough to read faces. Kiran's eyes were too wide and then less so when her hand lifted and paused in the old trawler skipper's slow-down sign she had learned years ago. His shoulders dropped from the hunch. His next exhale came on seven the way she taught him.

Roof groan again, deeper, a fraction earlier than expected. She took it in and left it alone. Not a thing to fix. A thing to live under.

She wrote once more, small and plain: E 59 / M 41 / K 53. 129 / 127 / 118. Warm lens holds. Then she clipped the slate back and kept moving into the band aligned with their vector.

Clearance narrowed and angles increased catch risk. The right-hand arm pinched, then opened into a dogleg she couldn't see the end of, with short, fat icicles close enough to take webbing. Elise stopped them with a palm and reached for Marta's harness. A nod. Marta's hand came to the primary reel. Elise made the leapfrog sign: anchor, advance, anchor. Line meant control and risk both. Maze rule had been no line; the dogleg forced a change. Dogleg with zero reference; line reduces loss-to-geometry risk despite entanglement cost. This geometry raised entrapment probability when silt ran and gear caught. The dogleg had no reference; without a line a diver could drift off-axis.

"On you," Marta signed, small. Elise freed the reel from Marta's hip, paid out only what they could see, and tied the first wrap around a stub of rock with a clean, compact lock. She tested the hold. It took a steady pull without slip. Marta slid forward, placed her shoulder under the icicles, and waited. Elise advanced, set the next point, then signalled Kiran to

move up.

Kiran's gloves curled wrong at the fingertips. He reached to set a wrap under Elise's supervision, missed the turn, and tried again. He lost friction and the line lifted. Time went in small increments. His breath ran three counts high. Elise put her hand over his and drew the path of the line against the rock. He understood, but the fingertips acted slow.

Marta watched the sequence without complaint. When the wrap still floated loose, she moved past Kiran with minimal contact and took the line, half a beat only, and set two placements back-to-back with neat, quick hands. His exhale hitched by half a beat; his fingers flexed once and stilled. She returned the line with a look that wasn't anger. It was something stored for later. Elise nodded once and went on.

They advanced again. The dogleg bit to the right in a tight corner. The line brushed a calcified lip and made a rasp audible through water and glove. Elise stopped. She put her lamp on the sheath and saw a lighter patch where fibres had scuffed. She lifted the line, added a quick redirect with a backup hitch to keep it off the lip, then moved them on. Abrasion noted; redirect added; moved.

Elise altered the pattern for Kiran. No more wrap-and-lock. She gestured the simpler version: half-hitch with a back-up turn he could do with blunt hands. Not as secure. Secure enough with spacing and the right pull angle. He executed it with a small improvement in speed and no slip when she tested it.

They took the dogleg with the line guiding them. Each body learned the feel: tension low and even, no sudden loads; a hand to the sheath for a second to feel the direction through the glove; a forearm along rock to reduce the chance of a fin tip catching. Kiran's breath ticked up again as the corner closed around him.

Elise ran the ledger as action. Shoulder tap on eight. Hold on sixteen for one count, then go. She added a micro-pause rule to the slate and held it up: 50 FINS = 1 COUNT PAUSE. Kiran's shoulders eased into the

rhythm. Over two cycles his breaths per stroke trended from three to two and a half; exhale timing evened to the seventh count. His numbers steadied inside the small system she gave him.

Numbers again when the dogleg opened one shade. E 58 / M 39 / K 52; 124 / 122 / 114 bar. She wrote them and kept the slate visible along the line of travel. Two under fifty would be the threshold they couldn't afford. One under fifty now. Kiran's spare would cross soon enough.

The hum grew louder and settled low in the ribs. Flow was strongest where the halocline went from veil to sheet to veil again. Marta's cone shortened yet more. She narrowed it to retain throw and lost width. Kiran's beam held just soft enough to worry her; not a decision; a note.

They stayed within the cage's rules. Elise treated the line as aid, not guarantee. She kept placement spacing short and the pull angles clean, aware of what a snag would do to them in an instant.

Groan interval drifted shorter by a quarter-beat and the pull across the cheek strengthened. On that shift she shortened arcs and pulled spacing in by half a body length. The line provided order on the next stretch and added handling cost. The floor fell into a silt fan that had slid off a ledge during some older flex. The fan moved on a slow lateral drift. A breath of current touched it and the upper layer began to move sideways towards their line path.

"Change," Elise signed to the team, then shifted roles properly. Marta forward placements. Kiran trailing line minder only. No fine knots. Keep the sheath off the fan.

Marta edged along the fan's high side, elbows tucked, fins feather-light. She set a low tie and kept the angle sharp to lift the line above the moving silt. The fan slid under the line and did not take it. They gained one metre of safe edge.

Kiran kept the line between two fingers and watched the sheath, not his own hands. The webbing he had tucked under his hip strap on the broken-clip side floated out once and Elise reached and pressed it flat again. No tug, no pull. It held for now. She wrote that now in her head as if it were on paper.

They reached a squeeze where the roof pressed close enough to brush a tank valve if anyone lifted for air wrongly. Elise turned her head and her fin tip clipped a protrusion. The contact was small. Her body did the thing it did since the cave accident: ribs tightened, breath wanted to go fast. She didn't allow it. She doubled her check cadence. Left hand ran the valve. Right hand checked buckles. She performed her old habit: touch-check valves twice at transition. She flattened her breathing to the count. Exhale on seven. Hold the last half-beat. Attention narrowed to the edges of the lens and the line between them.

A tiny flash of something in Kiran's hand spun away when the fin wake touched it. He had been holding a small carabiner, no reason in this moment beyond the need to have a thing he could manage. It fell, caught a flicker, then vanished into fines. He looked after it by reflex. Elise put her palm flat. No. He stilled. She didn't spend air or attention on it. Motion over recovery. Leave it. Move.

A soft patter started above as small grit let go. Not a figure. A fact: the roof above them was shedding pellets along a crack. The behaviour was local and current. Elise lifted her hand and made the no-stall sign: a chopping movement forwards. Marta increased speed within limits and slid them out from beneath the section in three slow breaths. The patter continued behind and stopped when the pocket finished.

After the crack, with groans arriving early by a quarter-beat, she wrote: E 56 / M 36 / K 50; 119 / 117 / 109 bar. Two at or under fifty. She tightened lamp arcs to cones. Scan sweeps shortened; throw distance reduced.

The hum widened. The right-hand wall pulled away by a metre and the ceiling lifted by half of that. In the lift, a black bubble sat under an irregular dome. Air. Not much. Enough to mark. Elise touched Marta's elbow and pointed her lamp. She drew a small half-circle on the slate with a dot and labelled it: DOME. She added a tiny arrow from their path. Not now. Later, if later existed.

She took the probe into the flow and aligned it along the warmer axis. -0.8°C . A touch stronger. She put her cheek to it for a second to verify that her skin still read the same. It did. The direction sharpened. She saw it pass through the team's bodies: Marta's shoulders squared into the vector; Kiran's hands unclenched for two beats before cold reclaimed them. A small notch of morale appeared and then flattened back into the work.

She turned the slate to them and wrote the line that mattered. 16 HRS. She underlined it once. Marta's jaw moved, silent. Kiran looked down and then up again. Elise clipped the slate back.

They moved into a narrower throat with the line live between them and the warmer lens holding around their shoulders. A low band vibrated through their ribs. The roof groaned out of time and the icicles clicked once with the shift. The ledger stayed with them and lengthened.

They kept the leapfrog placements tight to conserve light. Marta did the next two knot sets without any waste. Elise gave her the spare seconds by not adding instruction. Kiran minded the trailing line with attention she could trust. He didn't pretend to be what he wasn't in this cold. He carried what he could.

The next brine pulse arrived from above left, thinner than the first downwash but enough to put a wobble in trim. Elise countered with two taps of wing gas and one slow bleed from the suit for the team's timing.

The probe stayed in its pocket. Trust bodies before tools when they read true.

She recorded gas when they reached a short shelf that could tolerate a pause without loading up silt. Elise: 115 bar. Marta: 112. Kiran: 105. She put the numbers on the slate with the dome symbol in the margin to keep route memory near the figures. She didn't circle anything.

Marta's beam shortened again as the cold pressed into the cells. The cone still did the job when concentrated; it didn't illuminate comfort. Kiran's spare held in the low fifties. Elise's stayed above mid-fifties for now.

The line came under the cross flow and started a low vibration in the glove when she held it. Not dangerous. Informative. She used that vibration to keep the angle true round the next buttress so the sheath stayed off any other calcified edges. She could feel where it would rub by where it hummed.

They slipped past the buttress and into another run of veils. The water tasted metal in the last beat of her exhale. CO₂ pushing at the edges. She kept the micro-pauses at fifty strokes. Every stop slowed them and steadied CO₂. Not rest. Just a debt that didn't compound.

The lens matched their path and held. She confirmed the vector and advanced.

They advanced into the constriction with the line live and their bodies tuned to it, the roof low enough that sound and pressure conveyed conditions.

On the far side of that constriction the floor rose in a rubbly run. The line required attention; small stones could lift and pin it under pull. Marta fore-read the catch points and scissored the line above them with

controlled lifts and replacements. Each lift saved five seconds they couldn't afford to spend dragging. Elise registered the competence and did not add instruction.

The ridge formed a hard right lip where the warmer lens hugged. Elise rode that edge with the probe flat, eyes forward. Numbers held at -0.8°C across six metres of travel. Then a pulse of -0.9°C touched the cheek and she saw the lens bend a degree only; she signalled the helm correction and the team took it.

Her left thigh cramped, a short hard burn. She paused at the micro-rest and stepped the leg through its range while her hands kept the line static. The cramp went and the ledger recorded the cost. She didn't waste a hand motion on it.

A shallow scrape whispered against Kiran's trailing side when a brine icicle met the hip strap. The tucked webbing held. It reminded her that it would not take a pull. She moved herself in closer to him and kept the line between his potential catch point and the next hazard run. It wasn't protection. It was probability control.

They came to a low chamber where the roof rose by half a metre for six body lengths. She allowed the micro-pause to extend by one count so Kiran could stretch his hands and force some flow back into fingers. He flexed the gloves and the fingertips answered in a dull way. Marta's next handover met Kiran's glove with a fractional tighten and then went. Marta lifted her wrist and gave Elise her lamp percentage without being asked. 34%. Elise reduced sweep width and shortened placements. Elise held her own. 54%. Kiran's spare. 48%. Still two at or under fifty. She kept arcs tight and brought placements one notch closer. She used the line for range where light ended. She accepted the dependency.

They left the chamber and entered a narrow that stung the sinuses with brine at the back of the throat. The hum tightened to a narrower band. The lens, warmer by a fraction still, aligned with the narrowing. There was no comfort in that. Only the absence of contradiction.

Elise checked the slate once more and turned it. E 54 / M 34 / K 48. 112 / 109 / 101. 16 HRS. DOME □. LENS □. HUM □. She tapped the last arrow and the line in the same movement.

They moved faster than at the start and slower than they wanted, which was the only honest speed available.

A final check of the run ahead showed a pinch where the line would need to be pulled low under a lip. Marta set the first half-hitch and then a back-up and turned to Kiran without words. He had the trailing section and held it at the right angle on the first try. Small improvement. Elise registered it and released it.

They eased under the lip, kept the line off the calcified protrusions that would eat it, and kept the breathing cadence steady. Elise's jaw ached against the regulator. She stretched the hinge one millimetre between breaths when the water allowed, then locked her jaw. A waste of focus.

They crossed the pinch without touching it. The lens held. The low band stabilized movement and limited buoyancy drift. The roof groaned again, travelling away down the channel before them. She took that as data: load shifting ahead, not behind. Nothing predictive. Still nothing to ignore.

They kept to the work as groans drifted off pattern by a quarter-beat and clearance over valves went down another finger. Stay tight. Keep count.

Chapter 4

CO₂ Creep

They came up under the black bubble. Matched the 'DOME' mark, small hold, not a refuge. The guideline hummed faint in Elise's glove where it touched rock, a small note that meant angle, not safety. She put her lamp on the trapped air, read the edge, and held the team still until their own bubbles cleared.

The dome was no bigger than two bodies laid head to foot. The underside of the ice showed a grey glaze where brine had dried and refrozen in sheets. She kept the regulator between her teeth and raised a flat palm. No de-regging. She signed slow-breathe with a hand over her chest and held up eight fingers. In through the valve. Exhale on seven. Hold the last half-beat. Bleed CO₂ without paying in panic.

Marta steadied, elbows tucked, beam narrowed for throw. Kiran floated a half-hand high until he bled his suit and sank the centimetre back into trim. His eyes were too wide at first, then less so when Elise matched his shoulders with hers and tapped his scapula on the count.

The probe went into the seam just beneath the air pocket, held flat. -0.8°C, steady. Warmth was a number, not a feeling, but she also let the side of her face slide across the laminar line for a second. Less sting than the bulk brine. Matching data. Probe stowed, she turned the slate.

E 52% / M 33% / K 47%. She wrote it without boxes. Beam throw shortened under the pocket. Gas: E 108 bar / M 105 / K 96. She left space for the next line.

Kiran tapped his temple in the narrow, deliberate way that meant headache without drama. He kept the other hand on the line. Elise

brought her lamp to his face and held it. His pupils were even, response present. The regulator mouthpiece twitched as he fought the reflex to pant. He kept it. Two breaths later he lifted his hand again and turned it in the water: still there. She made the palm-down sign for slow. He matched her count, chest working under the suit in constrained motion.

A drip hit her hood. Then another on the shoulder. The air dome's membrane made a faint sound as condensation beads grew and let go. Shrinking, measurable and present, not imagined. She brought the slate back up and wrote 5 MIN in block letters. Underlined once. Marta nodded small. Kiran's hand made one tap on the guideline as acknowledgement.

Marta's hand then came up, economical as always. She pointed to Kiran, drew a bottle shape, slashed it clean. Stage off. Lighter. Faster. She kept her face plain. No waste.

Without looking at Kiran, she answered. She drew 3 D / 6 T, tapped each diver, tapped each back and stage once. Boxed 6 T with a rectangle and put a short arrow forward. Gas was mass and redundancy both. Jettison here would buy drag and lose future breathing and balance. It wasn't an option while they still owned plan. She shook her head once for clarity. Marta's jaw set. She didn't argue because the numbers were logged. The disagreement moved inward where it cost less oxygen but not less.

Kiran's hand hovered over his stage boltsnap to help. Elise put a single finger on his glove and pressed down lightly. Centre, she signed. He moved back between them on the line, and she repositioned herself to cover his broken-clip side. The tucked webbing stayed put. Not load-worthy. She made a note of the angle with the line against his harness so any future pull would come first to her.

Drips increased. A fine chalky bead formed along one run of ice overhead and began to connect in a line. A fine, constant patter against their hoods. The pocket would not hold. She held her breath to the

eight-count and let it fall out on seven, feeling the copper push of CO₂ at the back of her throat soften one notch under the discipline, not leave. The dome air was not for them.

She rolled the slate one last time. Gas unchanged enough not to cost ink. She added the third dot beneath 5 MIN.

On the fifth dot, she capped the grease pencil and stowed it, looked to Marta. Marta's beam answered with a single slit of light ahead. Elise brought her palm up and closed it. Go.

They slid off the pocket as the dripline began to link across toward closure, Kiran's grip holding the sheath clean on the first hand-to-hand. The team fell back into the cage at 1.5, 2 m spacing, Kiran in the centre, the guideline humming in Elise's left glove and through bone, the probe at her right hip in its usual clip. They moved; silence conserved gas.

Marta tapped her wrist, then pushed a flat palm forward. Two fingers repeated: move. Time gone. Speed now. She drew the blade-edge of her hand flat across her neck to set the stake. Her beam narrowed to a thin throw and she let the rest of the cone die.

Elise answered with the ledger. She put the slate up long enough for "3 D / 6 T" to exist again in their cones and tapped Kiran's harness twice with the gloved knuckle. All three. Then she turned the slate and clipped it back without writing another number because they didn't need the writing to know the meaning. She held the count and felt the hum settle into the ribs again, a lower, steadier band than before the dome.

Kiran stole half a body forward in the next movement. He took Marta's shadow as a lane and tried to live there. Proof of value. His fin caught a ridge nub. The tap threw fines up and a soft dark cloud rose around them, silt turning within their cones. He stopped, a small, honest freeze. His breath lifted by an eighth of a beat, then caught itself on her

shoulder tap.

Elise closed on him and laid a hand on his harness and moved him back to centre. One touch. No tug. The cage held again, angle held to the lens. Marta didn't react in motion but when her lamp brushed across her face, the hard set to her mouth showed and then went dark as she turned away. There wasn't room for speech underwater and there wasn't much room for forgiveness either.

The roof cracked somewhere ahead. Low note into the bones, not a pop. Pressure moved across their arms a second later; the water pressed differently, and the ceiling lowered by about 2 cm. Elise let the count absorb it. She didn't change depth; she changed posture, flattening into the flow with forearms close and head lower by the centimetres that bought survival most often.

The warm lens ran flatter through the corridor and then thinned where the walls drew apart by about 30 cm. Her cheek read little in the first pass. She held the probe in against the band until the silt made the digits lie, numbers flicking with backscatter. She stowed it and used the other instrument the environment gave. She brought her face into the seam with care and opened the nasal passage against the regulator. The brine sting shifted left of midline, only by a touch, a burn specific across the thin skin and sinuses. She held that tiny fact for two beats and tipped her lamp left and signed the turn. A wrong turn would add minutes and CO₂ debt in silt.

Marta didn't give the OK sign. She went where Elise pointed and kept her own count. Trust narrowed to compliance for now. The shift was small but carried forward. Elise did not chase it with a feeling. She matched Marta's speed and kept the cage compact, line low, valves down, aligned to the lens axis, Kiran's weaker side covered.

They moved on a corridor that had shifted with flex and season. The halocline formed sheets that folded and refolded along their forearms. The irregularity added a wobble to buoyancy that they fought by habit,

not thought. Breathing found the old pattern: eight, seven, hold; it did not pull the copper taste out of the mouthpiece. It just kept it from getting worse faster.

They passed a spot where the ridge fell away in a slight step. The pull across their chests increased by a hair. She logged the vector by how it moved Kiran's harness in her grip and put a single pencil dot on the slate to mark it later if they saw it again. When they looked back later there would be no dots at all; now dots felt like a luxury.

The roof glaze turned granular; the transmitted tone through ice dropped a step; clearance tightened across valves. At the next flex pulse, clearance dropped by 2 cm, down another finger. Elise saw the water draw in before the fines opened and she was already flat, tanks level with the ceiling. The collapse ahead pushed silt outward in a slow curtain that turned the channel grey. She brought her head down further and took the edge under it. Elise scraped her tank valve on a run of ice. The sound cut through water and straight into the jaw hinge because it arrived through bone.

Her hands did what they always did when a valve contacted anything. Left: touch-check valve. Right: buckle run and first-stage glance. The move wasn't a superstition. Contact triggered the check sequence. She regulated desire and fear into the eight-count and kept it.

The backflow from the micro-collapse ran past their legs and into the path they had taken. It carried fines, making retreat low-visibility and unlikely. The water behind them went to near-zero visibility. She accepted it and then wrote it in the part of her mind that logged everything she would rather not need: retreat now would mean arm's length. Cost too high to count as plan.

Marta had the reel out as a matter of course. Elise lifted the line off a sharp lip in the new geometry, held the redirect while Marta tied the next point. Kiran came in for the handoff and his hands didn't close right. The gloves moved stiff in the cold. He lost the half-hitch two times and then dropped the line end before the half-hitch set to the silt. It spun once and was gone under fines. A half-beat hung while the end settled. Elise tightened on the trailing line; the bite came through the glove, then eased.

Marta didn't look at him. She ran the lock and the backup around what the rock offered and made it clean in one movement. It was kindness because it was what kept them moving. It was unkind because it did not wait for his hands to catch up to what his brain wanted. Elise didn't burn air on an acknowledgement. She took the trailing line in her glove and tested the tension and nodded into the hood because they were still inside a system that moved.

Elise held the slate up against the dark, turned her lamp onto it, and wrote 15 MIN. She underlined it once and tapped Kiran's shoulder, then Marta's. Push intervals reduced. Admit fatigue. Control CO₂ debt by structure, not will. Kiran's breathing ticked up on the last movement and then slid onto the new rhythm with relief that showed up only as a lowering of the shoulders by a centimetre.

She rolled the slate and updated the ledger. Battery: E 51% / M 33% / K 46%. She wrote them and did not draw boxes; boxes imply promises. Arcs tightened. Scans shortened. Marta's cone now would go where her arm went and nowhere else.

The new corridor sent out a crisp series of brine icicles from a lateral seam. They grew sideways, not down, whorled and pale. Elise marked them in her head because they indicated lateral flow and how the warm lens cut into the brine. She logged the pattern for flow and hazards. She checked for catch points as she passed; the sideways growth had tiny wings that would catch webbing under a tug.

She dipped her cheek into the run under the icicles and let the skin map the gradient. A stronger, coherent pull to the right shoulder once they cleared the growth. She took the probe into the same seam and let the digits sit. -0.8°C , stable in the centre of the lens, -0.9°C at the edge. She signalled a small correction with two fingers. Marta adjusted immediately. Kiran held angle with the trailing section consistent.

Gas check when the water gave them a hand's worth of stillness on a trapezoid shelf: Elise 101 bar. Marta 98. Kiran 90. She wrote them down. She did the mental arithmetic she always did even when she wished she did not want to know. Everything cost.

The roof came down by about a centimetre in the next breath and the sound this time stayed inside the ice. Not a crack into water. A compression behind the sheet. Elise pulled their bodies tighter to the shape of the passage. Fins worked only as the smallest adjustment instruments they had. A slight change in the guideline's hum marked an angle shift. She matched it to the lens.

She put the pencil to the slate to mark the sideways icicles as a symbol, a quick run of short horizontal marks and a tiny arrow along them. Not for beauty. For later, if later existed. It meant track the vector at these formations; they indicated a vector.

Kiran's broken-clip webbing lifted with a random pulse. Elise put the back of her hand to it, pressed it down, and trapped it under the line sheath for the three beats it took to settle. It held. It would not hold under a load. She shifted her body to make sure no load would go there first.

The CO_2 taste sharpened on her tongue. She extended the micro-pause at the next fifty fin strokes by the half-count she had not wanted to spend. The hold did what it always did: made the next few counts cheaper. She let her jaw unclench by a millimetre, then closed again because the regulator seal held better with a steady shape.

They found the current sharpening along their centreline, a faster thread inside the band. Elise set them onto it and held the angle. She did

not label it hope; the numbers said -0.8°C and the body matched the probe. That fact sat where other feelings might have been.

They moved onward. The interval would ring in two minutes and Elise would tap shoulders again and point to a shelf if the fjord offered one. The roof pressed down; icicle angle showed it and a lower frequency carried through bone. The cage held. She logged another line; nothing else erased.

They came round a short elbow and the guideline vibrated against her glove before Elise's headlamp wrote it in light. The sheath vibrated unevenly; the line angle was changing under them. She altered her pull to take the corner wider and gave Marta the angle with a lifted forefinger against the sheath. Marta raised her own hand and skimmed the line up over a new-grown lip, saving another five seconds into future that still only existed if they kept making it.

Breathing. Eight. Exhale on seven. Half-beat. Repeat. No conversation to overlay it. Only the regulator hiss and a low groan through ice.

The smell shifted in the hood where smell could exist as a memory brought on by CO_2 , a flavour of iron behind the tongue. She marked it and did not catastrophise. She kept the breath to discipline and pulled Kiran's shoulder back into her shadow when his hands wandered to fix a thing that could not be fixed by him now.

They eased under a roof bulge with tanks orientated so the valves rode the lowest arc. Elise saw a new line scar on the roof not made by them and then dismissed it because she was not here to read history. She had the count to hold. She had bodies to move. She kept to what was true and useful: count, line, clearance.

She gave Marta the next tie-off position before Marta asked. Marta made the knot single-handed in a fraction under any sensible time. Kiran took the trailing line and held it at the required angle without correction. Elise acknowledged the precision with a single squeeze on his shoulder.

He didn't look. He didn't need to.

The next roof sound was a long, low groan migrating ahead. The water pressure eased by a thumb's weight across their backs, then returned. Elise read it as load shifting beyond them. Not prophecy. A condition. She altered nothing in direct response except attention ordering. First: line to lens. Second: clearance. Third: silt feedback behind for what it meant to retreat. Fourth: batteries. Fifth: gas. The order was not a virtue. It was just the path across the next two metres of water.

Onwards until the interval or the ceiling forced a stop. She logged: Battery E 50% / M 32% / K 45%; Gas E 96 bar / M 94 / K 86; interval 15 MIN.

Chapter 5

The Cheek Test

The guideline's hum steadied against her glove as the passage opened into a cross of channels. Elise halted them before the silt in their own cones could confuse the junction. She held the slate near her face where she could keep the numbers stable. Breathing: eight on, seven off, hold the half-beat. The regulator hiss was small and regular. The roof sounded in the background, a slow pressure shift somewhere within the ice. She kept pace steady within it. The last slate from the previous sector still showed 3 D / 6 T and 15 MIN underlined; the slight-left off the diffuse fork had brought them to this cross.

Four branches. Starboard carried a faint shimmer in the halocline and an eddy that touched her knee in a counter-rotating way. Port showed a short, rising veil over rock within two metres. Ahead, the lens seemed to thin and scatter. Behind was their track and the memory of fines moving back into it after the micro-collapse. Residual fines still hung in slow sheets. She tested the probe along each seam in turn, keeping it flat to the flow. Digits flickered across the first three readings and steadied only when she angled the head to starboard by a degree; then they also flickered. Backscatter from fines made the instrument unreliable.

She stowed the probe and let her skin work. Moving along the hub, nose in the regulator cup, she aligned her cheek to each branch without letting her chest push water into the seams. Starboard first. The sting ran along the right side of her septum after an eight-count. Back to centre. Port. The sting was harsher there and arrived on three. Colder. Ahead. Little to feel. The brine tasted flatter and the flow lost coherence under

the lamp. She let the lamp move in slow arcs, low to avoid lighting the silt into glare. Then the up-branch under the roof itself , not vertical, but a slight rise beneath a wavering shelf.

A raised hand: hold. Marta's beam cut low and narrow, waiting. Kiran's lamp shook once at the edge then steadied when she tapped his shoulder on eight.

Starboard again. She counted. On six the sting traced the right cheekbone and into the soft tissue of the nose. Warmer by a fraction compared to port's bite. She pressed in a little more. A flow brushed her hood toward that side. Marked. Port again to verify. The sting arrived faster. Cold sink.

Marta moved her probe to port while Elise kept still, elbows tight. Marta's hand showed a number: -1.1°C . She gave the flat sign for cold and shook her head. Agreement without breath. Elise's shoulders lowered for one count and reset.

Kiran reached for the seam Elise had tested last. His cheek touched the water and he held too still for the first five beats. His pupils were large in the cone. Nothing. He started to withdraw. Elise put two fingers on his scapula and resumed the eight. On ten his eyes flickered a fraction and he turned his hand slightly , a hesitant left-of-midline sting signal. The delay was in his skin, not the environment. She let the check live because it gave him something other than fear to hold.

She drew a cross on the slate and marked a path with three arrows: a short arrow to the right, a short upward tick on that branch, then a left through what looked like a tighter seam beyond a lip. She tapped the sequence: right, up, left. Marta nodded once. Kiran matched the taps half a beat late, then righted it.

She brought her lamp up under the roof shelf and read the curtains hanging from it. Threads of clear brine had frozen into sheets over weeks, soft edges beginning to harden in the cold. Clearance over their valves at rest looked like 3 cm; under fins, it would drop to two if they let their hips

lift. She shifted trim by a degree and brought the team closer to the floor to stay within the lens without scraping the ceiling.

Go. She closed her palm and they moved on the right arrow. The guideline in her left hand ran smooth, then vibrated as it touched a rock nub; she lifted and laid it gently to remove contact. The passage pinched by half a body length under the first curtain. She took the lowest path by the ribs, counted the centimetres between the ceiling and her valves and bent her neck at the right degree to keep the regulator seal uncompromised. Marta passed clean; Kiran flattened well enough that his broken-clip side did not threaten the sheet. Elise had placed herself so any load would hit her glove first.

The upward tick arrived where the seam climbed over a shelf, not a vertical lift but a rise of maybe half a metre across three body lengths. She put her cheek to the flow. Milder sting than port; consistent with the prior -0.8°C instrument read along the lens. She tapped the slate and angled them up at the shallowest usable slope, keeping fins quiet to avoid building oscillations in the curtains behind them.

On the left turn the roof lowered; the edge of the shelf carried icicles the length of her hand and no longer flexible. She rotated her wrist to protect the line and let the team slide under in order. Marta set and moved with no waste, placements clean, angles exact. Kiran followed with his eyes forward, breath steady and a notch louder than before.

Two small bodies moved through their cones, copepods or amphipods, pale in the angled light, and the next breaths came easier with them in view.

At the hand's worth of stillness after the left, Elise turned the slate and put the numbers down, blocking nothing: Battery E 49% / M 30% / K 44%. She left boxes off. She tightened arcs and pulled spacing in by a hand. She added gas beneath because it cost less than guessing wrong later: E 92 bar / M 90 / K 83. She kept the slate high for a count to let them absorb the trend. Then she clipped it away and flattened her profile

for the next run.

They slipped out of the junction with no contact. Elise gave the shoulder taps at fifty fin strokes and let the exhale run a fraction longer than seven to bleed CO₂ and keep the pace smooth.

The corridor changed. The halocline smoothed again and revealed clear chimneys that hung from the roof in banks. They had formed where dense brine met colder bulk water and froze the fresh along their edges. Several reached the floor and fused against rubble. Their walls were thin and their angles matched the flow, each tube leaning in the same direction by a few degrees. Fragile field; tight tolerance.

Elise reduced speed with a flat palm and shifted her lamp to a harder, narrower throw. The field was dense; each touch could fracture a tube and send clear shards into their next metres. The guideline had to thread through the gaps without contact. Marta read it the same way, bringing the reel close and paying out just enough line to keep it between chimneys. She moved without haste and without extra. Marta set a wrap on a knob of rock between two chimneys; a redirect lifted the sheath above a lip; the lock sat compact against a clean edge with no slack to stray.

Kiran's shoulders were tight and up. Elise touched his scapula once on eight and felt the force go out of the posture. He kept his hands in a place where they were useful and not dangerous. Gloves curled still, fingertips slow to close, but he held the trailing angle of the line exactly through the first two placements without correction.

They moved a metre into the field and spacing tightened while visibility clarified. The chimneys revealed flow lines plainly. The roof carried a thinner layer here and the space between tubes was sometimes the width of a forearm, sometimes a body and a half. Elise reduced fin

wash to a slow, even cadence and kept her elbows tucked to keep profile small. She made the line angle passable with her left hand and let Marta work.

Kiran crowded a gap that did not need crowding. The sleeve of his suit brushed a thin-walled tube. The break made no sound; it was a change in the way light moved. The tube slumped and split along a seam and clear shards drifted in a slow cloud. Elise froze them with one open palm. Fins stopped. Hips stopped. Water that had been in motion stayed in motion, but they did not add to it.

She took the line higher by two hand spans with her left hand where a sister tube offered protection and drew a half-arc to round the debris without cutting new edges. Marta read the change instantly and moved to catch the sheath on a clean angle. The redirect did not touch a tube. Kiran's hands moved a fraction toward another fix that was not his to make; Elise placed her knuckles on his harness. He stilled.

Shards descended slowly through the dense brine. They would catch if pulled against. Elise let them fall. Then they resumed with a quiet push that did not trigger new vibrations in the field.

The roof groaned above them and the tubes shivered. A low, broad tone ran through the chimneys and made them quiver on their own axes. The sound did not alter the plan. All three divers were already still from Elise's halt and so they absorbed the tremor without adding to it. The quiver drained away. They kept going.

Kiran's hand came up with the apology sign, fingers flat and then touching his chest. Elise gave him a small nod that was almost not a nod at all. Caring in this field was keeping him between them and letting the count push him instead of comfort. She put her lamp back on his face for a beat. His eyes held true. Breathing ticked on seven when it needed to.

They progressed. Marta's next placement was a compact lock on a rock spur with a hard redirect to keep the sheath away from a fan of fused chimneys. The line hummed very slightly in Elise's glove where a lateral

seam pushed across it. She matched the hum with angle, keeping the rope off any ice edges.

At the end of the field, where the chimneys thinned and the floor rose by a small run of rubble, Elise turned the slate and wrote: Battery E 44% / M 29% / K 43%. The digits were harder to see now and not because of silt. She wrote the gas as well: E 87 bar / M 85 / K 78. She left it plain, cut speed a notch, and compressed spacing until elbows nearly brushed.

They cleared the last chimneys with the line intact and a corridor ahead that bent right and down a fraction. The field had taken minutes and milliamp-hours they could not spare. They moved on with less margin.

The broader-channel hum ran along their ribs again and Elise noted it without letting it set the priority. The roof sounded lower by a shade and the icicles along the next section carried a slightly new angle. She propagated the change by flattening trim and compressing the cage by a fraction. Marta's beam had narrowed to a slit and what it showed was reliable; it just showed less.

Marta lifted two fingers toward Kiran's chest, drew a throat-slash, then shoved her palm outward toward him, low and deliberate. Abandon him here. Not a stage drop.

Elise set a flat palm between them. Then she brought the slate up and wrote the ledger in the same fast block she always did: 3 D / 6 T. She tapped each diver with the edge of the slate, then each cylinder, back and stage, once. A short, plain arrow forward. No boxes. She reached across and pushed Kiran into the centre lane with a precise shove that held no anger. No change to formation. No loss of redundancy.

Kiran's face turned into her cone. His eyes were clear and too wide and then less so as he felt the push. His hands settled on the trailing angle

and stayed steady. The next breaths ran true to seven and the half-beat hold, and Elise matched her count to his so he could borrow it.

A lower-band groan returned. Water pressed a little harder along their backs and the ceiling dropped by about a centimetre. Elise lowered her head by enough to buy the centimetre back and kept them flat. Every refusal cost something.

At a narrow ledge above a slow silt run, she wrote: Gas E 74 bar / M 72 / K 66. Battery E 39% / M 26% / K 40%. She added 15 MIN, underlined it once, then crossed the underline with a short slash and wiped it clean. She clipped the slate and cut the planned pause: micro-pause due in thirty fin strokes. She cancelled it with a wrist tap and a forward push of her hand, then pinched thumb and fingers to signal the next inhale starting on five to fold the half-beat into motion. A trace of iron touched her tongue. Marta's jaw set; her grip tightened on the reel frame for one count and she did not return an OK. Then she moved.

They took the right-hand bend. The guideline vibrated in Elise's glove in a way it had not for twenty minutes. A steadier, higher load, and a faint fiber whisper at the redirect rode into her palm. The free span between the last two anchors was shorter by about a glove-width than the prior span. She placed her forefinger along the sheath to signal angle shift. Marta skimmed the next redirect cleanly and lifted the sheath away from a lip that would have abraded it within a few more pulses. Kiran stood the load without his hands shaking.

The next corridor narrowed in its own right and then twisted left into a seam that glowed faintly where fines hung in slow slabs. Elise felt the nasal burn change on her right side and used her cheek to tune the line into the warmer flow without pulling them into a false lift. Marta didn't look back. She kept the path clean and her cone strict. Kiran matched the

angle with the strap of the line across his glove exactly, even as the tremor reappeared in his fingertips by a fraction. He held.

The roof groaned again and repeated in a rhythmic pressure pattern that slid in and out of phase with Elise's eight. Two cycles later the pulses traded a fraction of phase back, less out of time and more in line with the breath she made on purpose. She kept her breathing on the count; the roof pulses stayed on their own timing.

They came to a slot with roof curtains on one side and rubble on the other. She put her lamp low and showed the gap between the edges, then took the line along the tightest, cleanest part of that gap. A faint high-frequency vibration travelled the sheath; she eased the angle until it settled.

Fifty fin strokes. Micro-pause of a half-beat to let Kiran's CO₂ not compound. Then forward again. The field of work was small now: her glove on the line, Marta's forearm moving when it needed to, Kiran's shoulder a fraction below hers so the webbing tail could not lift into anything that would catch it.

She marked a short triangle on the slate and a dot against it to label a new angle in the hum. A simple index. If they were wrong later, they would know where they had been wrong.

The roof lowered again by perhaps another centimetre and the ice made a noise she had never learned to like. Heads went closer to chests. Valves approached a curtain and did not touch. Her left hand stayed ready on the valve because the last time contact had happened it had been a whisper and a check had prevented a second mistake. She kept moving.

The line tensioned as they rounded a slow bend. Load deepened through the glove. Ahead would likely impose higher line loads and more mandatory redirects. She ordered nothing in response beyond the movements they could afford.

They moved with live load in the line, Marta's cone stayed narrow, Kiran in the centre with the webbing tail pinned under what would not

catch it. Elise kept the count and their spacing held. She put the mass debate aside and set the next angles.

The next roof sound migrated ahead and down, and pressure left and returned along their backs by a finger's width. Flow tightened around their shoulders. Elise reduced profile and let the current pass.

Across the metres that were theirs to cover, they pressed on, keeping the count steady.

Chapter 6

Knot Failure

Elise brought the slate up and wrote tight fragments: 3 D / 6 T; count steady. Diagnose before force: read hum, inspect sheath, check roof. Conserve charge: narrow cones; stagger throw only when safe. Cheek confirm when probe flickers; flow before memory. Decide cleanly: reverse, then cut if reversal costs future.

The hum tightened first. Not louder, sharper, with a new tone in the water. Shards from the last chimney fracture still ticked along the floor, and the guideline held a small, rising vibration from the previous redirect. Elise brought the slate close to her chest to keep it from the roof and flattened her profile until valves were level with ice curtains. Marta's cone ran along an uneven lip where rubble shouldered the passage; the light showed a spur shape in the murk. The guideline lay across it with a small, hard angle. A hockle showed just beyond, one twist turned over itself, loop tight against stone.

She stopped them with a flat palm. Breathing on eight. Seven out. Half-beat.

The line hummed against her glove at an uneven rate. Not current alone. Load. She eased forward until her forearm touched the rock and saw the bind: the loop had bitten down where the sheath had crossed itself under tension, the twist having turned under load to pinch against the spur. White fuzz showed on the outer fibres where they had started to abrade. The rub point lined with a calcium ridge. A trap manufactured by their own pull and the corridor's geometry.

Kiran drifted half a hand closer than centre. Elise pressed two fingers into the scapula of his broken-clip side and sent him back into lane. His

exhale had shortened by half a count. He matched on the next breath when she tapped him on eight.

She tested the line with her left hand: push to relieve, pull to see if the loop would roll back over the spur. The sheath held. No give. Marta was already there with her eyes. Knife still in its sheath. Not yet.

Elise rotated the loaded section minutely, clockwise then anticlockwise, keeping the angle low so it would not saw the lip. The loop moved a millimetre. Then stopped. She changed her handhold and tried to walk the twist across the stone so the loop would un-hockle. The hum deepened and the line bit harder into its own turn. No relief registered in the line.

She leaned her cheek into the seam on her right. The sting wasn't strong enough to change anything and it took until nine to arrive. Flow ran along the spur. The right-hand cheek did not offer an exit. The probe stayed pocketed; fines ran flat in the cones and the instrument would flicker. She took another angle on the line and tried again to reverse the loop, easing tension with a small lengthwise push. Nothing useful moved. The white fuzz widened by a grain.

Marta unshipped her knife with a clean, controlled motion. Blade down, wrist steady. She didn't ask. She looked at Elise.

Elise checked the slate because numbers were part of the decision, not decoration. Gas: Elise 71 bar; Marta 69; Kiran 63. Battery digits were hard to see at minimal output but she knew the trend: E high thirties, M mid twenties, K high thirties. The reading would not change the way the line lay. Still, she wrote the gas so the record existed.

She closed her eyes long enough to feel the CO₂ sit behind her tongue. She eased the next exhale on seven, held the half-beat, and tasted the metal thin. Kiran temple-tapped once and stopped himself from tapping again when her hand found his shoulder.

One more attempt. She took the load with her left hand and slid two fingers of her right along the stuck loop, then rotated the standing part

against the stone by a degree and half a degree, counting under the regulator noise. The loop twitched. The hum changed note. If she rolled it any more without slack it would saw itself and the lip both, faster than she could move them. She pictured the tail that led back through the brinicle field. A loaded tail recoiling blind would drive through the brinicles; shards would multiply under thrash. Reversal had no clean path left that did not cost more than it bought.

She signalled freeze with her palm, then indexed the angle between the line and the spur with her forefinger along the sheath for Marta's benefit. She drew a short triangle with a slash on the slate to mark this line, spur wrong angle for later correction, and wrote below it: not the hum index. Then she pinched fingers twice in the slow-breathe signal and counted two cycles. When the count returned to a shape she could trust, she drew two fingers across her palm, firm and once.

Cut.

Marta angled the blade where the sheath would part clean and where the recoil wouldn't load their faces. Her left hand braced over the knot she'd tied three placements back. The knife slid in; the line popped with a felt release. The line sprang a thumb-width, hummed once as the loop fell slack, then lay quiet across the spur where it had bound. The three of them eased posture with the new clearance. Elise took one full, clean eight-count. No celebration. Only space to move. Marta held the blade still for one count before sheathing, then returned her hand to the line.

The wrong end lifted, the piece that led backward, already marked with fines from the field. It drifted up and then down and then vanished where the corridor turned and fines settled across it. No one pointed at it. The return path was gone.

Kiran made the sign that was thanks without fuss. One flat hand to his chest, once. Elise gave a single nod and brought the slate up to her mask. Battery first this time because light controlled range: E 38% / M 25% / K 39% at the outputs they had set for the cut. She wrote the numbers. She narrowed her own cone by a notch anyway because every notch saved current. Gas: E 67; M 64; K 58. ~4 minutes burned, ~8-12 m of line lost.

They were clear. The corridor ahead showed less silt than the place they'd been nursing for the last fifteen minutes. The hum felt more even along her ribs for three body lengths. She closed her palm. Go. They used the opening the cut had made and moved with the additional centimetres they had gained. For ninety seconds, breathing cadence eased and fin work settled. Fins made fewer corrections than they had; the line no longer sang in the glove.

Then the water flattened under her cheek. Not warmer, just less helpful. The slight sting that had become a way of knowing where the fjord permitted them to go took longer to arrive. On six instead of four. On eight instead of six. The corridor widened by half a body length and split against the next rubble rise. Two lanes, neither with decisive cue in the lamp's cone. She held them still with a palm and brought her face to the seam again, moving as a body that intended to make no turbulence.

Starboard: the sting was late and cold. Port: the sting was later, but not cold; only faint. The line they had paid for lay behind in a coil of dark. They were in front of a choice because of the cut, not gifted a path. Elise angled her jaw to stretch where it wanted to clench and wrote nothing. She placed her cheek again, counted again, and heard the roof answer with a long, indifferent groan that did not land on her eight.

The brief ease was over. Kiran kept his hands where they belonged. Marta's cone stayed steady.

Elise brought them to a stop. She turned the slate: Gas E 65; M 62; K 56. No boxes. No arrows drawn yet. The brief high settled into what it

always did under ice: work.

She set a small plan on the slate that their hands could execute under load. She wrote it in the barest shapes so their hands and the habit in them would understand faster than words. Burst. Tie only when forced. Cheek first. She tapped the cheek point twice and put her face into the water where the seam slid by at waist height, then angled so only skin, not chest, touched laminar flow. She counted. The sting moved across the right septum later than she wanted but more decisively than on her left.

Marta gathered the short forward length left from the cut, less than a metre of clean sheath, and coiled it flat into her left palm. She didn't make a sign with it. She clipped it to her harness where she kept things that did not fix this minute but might fix some later one. Her face carried no fresh argument. She changed nothing about her knife's place on the harness and looked forward.

Elise tested Kiran on a stub: a simple half-hitch with a backup turn as she had taught him earlier. His fingers closed slower than the glove deserved. The half-hitch missed three times. The backup turn did not lay against the rock square. She put her palm on his hand and pressed it down. No knots. She mimed angle hold with two fingers and the sheath. He nodded and held the line's angle in the space it was supposed to occupy, the job he could do and not damage. The next three breaths matched the eight once he had only the angle to keep.

Battery would not carry them if they used it as if nothing had happened. Elise signalled lamp rotation. She pinched fingers to her lamp, then to Marta's, then to Kiran's, then made a rolling motion. One cone wide while two went narrow for thirty fin strokes, then rotate. The water strobed when cones traded places. Edges of rock jumped in and out of throw and the world looked nearer when it was not. Elise let the count

take the nausea and flattened herself harder to the corridor so the body wouldn't try to reconcile two timings at once.

The roof noise changed somewhere ahead. Longer. A sustained groan that moved through the ice above them instead of ticking in pulses. She checked the next count against it and found them out of phase with no neat way to reconcile. Pressure spread across their backs instead of arriving in pulses. Spring tide moving where they could not see it, pushing hard against the roof overhead.

They followed the faint right. The corridor rose by half a metre over a run of six body lengths. The water above them felt smoother for that stretch. Then the space tightened again and the sound opened: a room ahead, not a corridor. The central span of a chamber, if one had formed here. A bell chamber can invite a rise; she kept them flat. Her lamp caught a thin rim rising under the roof, a dark lip marking the chamber edge. Clearance over valves ran to eight millimetres.

She put her gloves to two rocks on the left where scallops ran in a pattern that had repeated once two hours back: a pocked slab, then a scute, then a smooth run under icicles with white dust. She touched each in the order it existed and held the line's angle where those signs made sense. The line had carried their route memory; now she relied on tactile marks. She did not assign meaning. She only recorded what a path looked like.

Gas at the next stillness: Elise 61; Marta 58; Kiran 53. Battery under rotation would not report truth you could trust, but she wrote E 37% / M 24% / K 38%. Cones went leaner for the next rotation. Kiran's tremor returned only at the tip of the glove. When he tried to look ahead with his light instead of into the space he guarded, Elise touched his shoulder once and he returned the cone to his patch. He kept his light on his lane and held the angle.

They took the right-hand lip where the cheek read said to and slid past a thin sheet under the roof. Elise traced the edge with her lamp, not

touching. Marta read her angle correction immediately. Progress here drew on the margin the cut had given. They moved. They kept silent and watched gas.

The chamber announced itself by sound before it did in shape. The roof's groan no longer came from one side and moved along, but from everywhere and thinned as it travelled. The water felt heavier then lighter by a small change against their backs as some volume beyond them flexed. Elise edged them into the rise and flattened trim again because a bell's rim is where small errors compound. She counted the millimetres over valves: eight, then six. She checked the broken-clip side of Kiran's suit where the webbing tail could still lift. It stayed pinned beneath the sheath exactly where she had set it.

At the chamber's shoulder, she tested the seam with her cheek a final time before committing further: sting on six across the right; on eight across the left. Slower than perfect but coherent. Probe remained pocketed. Backscatter swam in the cones, fine particulate. Numbers did not like dirt when the difference they cared about was a tenth of a degree.

She lifted her palm and closed it. The plan stayed small and did not promise any more than the next four metres deserved. She turned the slate at the rise: Gas E 58; M 55; K 50. Battery E 36% / M 23% / K 37%. ~8 min since cut. They advanced knowing the cut had removed retreat and would show on gas, battery, and time under the roof.

Chapter 7

Chamber of Delay

Roof groan ran long through the ice. No pulse; load steady across their backs. When Elise raised her lamp, the cone showed the rim as a dark curve under a low roof, a lip barely higher than her valves. The roof sagged rather than pulsed.

She brought her cheek into the seam along the shoulder where the channel's flow hooked around the lip. The sting arrived slow and even on six across the right, late and consistent with what the last span had promised. The probe sat pocketed. Fines turned everything to flicker and the difference between tolerable and wrong came in fractions. Only the skin of her face moved against the seam; the rest of her stayed still to avoid noise in the read.

Valve clearance: eight millimetres at rest, six when the groan ran long. She flattened until the valves cleared the lowest arc without contact and memorised the angle, 12° . She set the angle by the rim's notch and the seam's sting, a fixed line in her count. The rim ahead went lower still where the throat pinched to a slot that would not admit a back-mounted cylinder with lungs full. One diver at a time. Gear stripped. Chest collapsed. No argument there. Geometry set the rule.

Her left palm laid on the rim. Cold pressed through glove. Edges felt true, not rotten. The throat drew narrower by a knuckle three body lengths in. It was not one of the forgiving restrictions that let you wriggle and keep your equipment aligned by patience. This one required that a person become smaller than they were.

Marta came in beside her shoulder, cone down to a slit. She raised her off-hand toward Kiran's gloves. The tremor was small and present.

Marta tapped Kiran's fingers once, then pointed at the throat. That signal did not need words.

Kiran steadied his light on the patch of floor he owned. He gave a compact OK and then a forward sign with controlled hands. Shoulders lifted with the next inhale; fell on seven. Elise watched the regulator mouthpiece settle behind the mask glass. Cadence held; the tremor stayed.

Elise brought the slate between them and wrote in fast block: ORDER. Then three short arrows: E □ M □ K. Underlined once. Under it she wrote ASSIST under K. She tapped her own chest, then Marta's, then Kiran's, slow enough to avoid a misread and to keep the water quiet. She added 3 D / 6 T on the lower edge because the ledger remained the ledger no matter where inside ice you stood. She left off boxes. Boxes cost time.

Marta's jaw set. Two fingers spread; she tapped her wrist three times. Then she turned her display for Elise. Elise scratched "-00:05" beside ORDER.

Elise answered with a flat palm. Hold. Her hand found the rim again and checked the bite. The roof groaned longer. Clearance shortened by 1 mm; she felt it in the angle of her neck against the hood. She took it into count instead of thought: inhale on the valve, exhale on seven, half-beat hold. Keep the half-beat even when the urge rose to spend it on a gasp.

Gas: E 56 bar; M 53; K 48. She wrote it in quick numerals and tapped the slate so each pair of eyes had the numbers. Battery on rotation read dimmer than digits: Elise 35%, Marta 22%, Kiran 36%. Numbers down. True. She clipped the slate back and flattened another millimetre when the roof leaned again.

Marta gave a flat negative and pointed at Kiran, then the throat. Her jaw set; no motion wasted.

Elise touched the rim and then her own chest and kept the arrows where they were. "I go first," she said, the same low shape. She put her

cheek against the seam again and counted six to feel the flow favour the right rim, then six again. No change.

Water beaded on the dome above. Not a run yet; a line of clean droplets formed and fell. The pattern showed exchange with an adjacent volume, against them.

Kiran's hand drifted toward his shoulder dump out of habit. Elise touched two fingers to his scapula and brought his arm back into center. He matched the next exhale to seven and the half-beat did not disappear. On that half-beat, he closed his glottis and swallowed once.

The slate came up one more time. She wrote small near the rim sketch: strip, pull, assist. She pressed the point of the pencil to each word. Then she turned it and wrote easier for gloved hands: NO ONE STAYS. She let Marta look at that line as long as Marta needed to look. Then she clipped the slate again without adding delay.

They moved backward a half-body to free water for staging without rubbing valves against the sheet. Stages off; hauled through on sheath lay. Back-mount stays. Clearance 6 mm at lean; pass possible with exhale and shoulder turn. Field of view narrowed to forearms, straps, and roof flex.

Elise unclipped her stage cylinder with deliberate hands. The boltsnap took a second attempt because plastic felt harsher through the glove than ice and her fingertips had started to flatten their sense of positions. She brought the stage forward, guided it along the floor, and felt how the rim caught at the shoulder where the body of the cylinder widened. It would need an angle; it would not need force if they held angle. Force wedged metal into cracks and abraded sheath against sharp edges.

Marta already had the short length of clean sheath out, the remnant they had salvaged after the cut. Under a slit beam she coiled it flat in her

left palm and then fed a bight through the stage handle. She did not tie anything that would bind in a pull. She set a lay that would close under tension and release when asked. She showed Elise the path of the sheath with two fingers and then clipped the leftover to her harness where it would not migrate into the throat and make problems with edges. The knife stayed in its first place. The set of her mouth did not change.

Kiran reached for his stage boltsnap. The snap mouth found metal and then skated off. His second attempt missed the ring and closed on nothing. The breath that followed his mistake stuttered and came hot in the hood. He made the third attempt. The glove did not know itself well enough to put pressure in the right motion.

Marta's hand arrived, took his wrist, guided the snap to the ring, and clicked it shut. One motion. No force wasted. Kiran flinched. His gaze dropped to the silt at his fins. Elise tapped his shoulder on eight and he drew the next inhale under control. The next exhale lengthened correctly to seven and the half-beat held.

Elise ran her contact sequence because ritual conserved error. Left hand to valve, right hand down the buckle run, one glance at first stage. She did it compressed, clean. She traced the hose path once to see if any loop had lifted near the rim. Nothing did. Her palm pressed to rim again because edges changed and because the last time she trusted a remembered edge the rope had found a spur and taken a turn none of them could afford.

Marta signaled tide again: palm horizontal, sliding forward and then down. The roof's groan aligned with it, a long, hard note that brought the valves closer than she liked. Elise lifted a finger for wait. Not for hesitation. For alignment. Her palm slid along the rim and found a tiny tooth where the ice had re-frozen into a ridge a finger's width long. The tooth would catch the sheath if they dragged it across without angle. She took those seconds and rotated the stage until the tooth would allow a low pass without abrading the sheath.

Kiran held the short coil against his chest where it lifted least. He kept his lamp fixed to the squared floor patch he had been given and did not spend light on curiosity. He watched Elise's hands and matched the breath that those hands asked of him.

Gas: E 55; M 52; K 47. Elise wrote these in small script on the slate and tapped Kiran's wrist until his eyes found the numbers. He tapped back once with the tips of his fingers against the edge of his glove. Jaw tight and moving under the mouthpiece.

She looked to Marta and drew a short line under the rim sketch, then three rectangles lined to show stages. She marked one rectangle with a dot to indicate the one she would pull first. Marta nodded once. She kept the marks simple. Elise moved the stage into the throat until the shoulder met the lip and then eased, not shoved, letting the rim show the angle it accepted. The stage slid two hands and settled. Battery: E 34%; M 21%; K 35%.

She checked the sheath lay again and the tooth she had memorised. It cleared. The stage sat forward out of their path and did not threaten to roll back. Attention went back to the bodies.

They were ready. Not safe. Just ready in the only way the geometry allowed.

Condensation fattened. A line of drops along the dome thickened until the spaces between beads closed into a run. Dome height lowered by 2 cm; drip line continuous. It turned to a clean stream that ran along the underside of the roof and then fell in a narrow ribbon. The sound was small and absolute. All three heads turned up by a fraction for a single beat and then returned to work because looking up did not change the rate.

Elise brought the slate up and hesitated for a check she would always have made when there were more minutes than now. Lower cam band, she had intended to run a palm under it to confirm it hadn't crept on the plate under movement. She stopped the hand halfway and closed her fist instead. The risk was accepted and owned. Spend seconds only where clearance increases.

Marta's hand came into the edge of her cone and gave a forward push. Go. Not a plea. A transfer of tone. She cut nothing now. She sent Elise.

Kiran held the short sheath coil against his sternum with his left hand and pinned the broken-clip side webbing under it again because he had seen Elise do that twice. He kept it there, a small, exact copy of a thing that made other things not get worse. He did not move toward the throat. He held position. His lamp stayed narrow. He watched their hands and did not watch the roof.

Elise laid her palms on the rim in the places she had mapped under cold. The rim was thin and firm under neoprene. Her cheek came into the seam one last time and she counted six to feel the sting cross right and then return. The sting on the left arrived slow. The read matched the prior test: right-hand lip, shallow angle, then down by a hand. Chin dropped until valves sat where they would clear and elbows pulled tight against ribs so fabric would not catch on a tooth.

The edge pressed through glove and gave back information the lamp could not provide. The rim ice was colder than the water. The cheek sting gave her the line her shoulders needed. She was small. Not enough. She made herself smaller.

54 / 51 / 46.

Eight in. Not full. The kind of eight that made the exhale count feel more valuable than the inhale had ever been. Seven out. Hold the half-beat. One more eight in, a hair shallower, because she would need to spend the breath as a tool in one piece and not in panic fragments. She

could feel the CO₂ metal at the base of her tongue and a dull pressure behind the eyes.

She glanced once at Marta. Marta nodded once, in time with the count. At Kiran. He held a stillness he had not owned at the beginning of the day.

Elise exhaled. Head turned to the right shoulder so the first passage would find the smaller line of her collarbone instead of the larger of her chest. She slid until the ice touched her hood at one point where she had expected two and continued past that point into the slot until the rim blocked the chamber behind her. Space narrowed to a tunnel; her ribs moved only as clearance allowed.

She kept the exhale moving, slow enough that it bought space and not a cough. Palms pressed, elbows pulled in. The lip contacted her left shoulder, then cleared by a skin's width. Clearance over the valve: three millimetres. A fine crack sounded on the roof. The rim required more angle.

Behind her, the coil on Kiran's chest did not lift. Marta's cone slid a hand-width to show only the patch Elise would need if she failed and tried to reverse, a line that did not exist anymore except in a gesture to steady any useless thought. The groan lengthened. She held the count.

Eight reduced to seven. Half-beat held. No slack. She emptied her lungs and turned her shoulder. Clearance ahead did not open.

Her exhale ended; the slot continued.

Chapter 8

Through the Throat

Her exhale had ended and the slot did not open. The next breath sat at the back of her throat, a reflex she kept behind her teeth. Ribs pressed in until the seam compressed her chest. She sipped a thread of gas through the second stage, then locked her glottis again and eased a trace back out to keep the exhale bias. No slack in the system.

She touched the cheek seam again, only skin to flow. Sting on six across the right, late and even. The read held. The rim ahead did not. The angle was wrong by less than a finger. She lifted her chin a millimetre to clear the valve and a long groan ran through the roof that shortened the clearance she had measured. Three millimetres became two and the hood touched ice.

A point of metal found resistance. Not the tooth at the rim she had logged. A spur further in. The valve shuddered against it. Stop, not yield.

Her jaw set under the mouthpiece. The taste of metal sharpened. The urge to pull air spread as pressure across her chest. She flattened harder and moved the shoulder another degree toward the right because the map she had built from skin indicated right as the only line that made any sense here. Nothing changed. The valve scraped against stone or ice she could not see.

She did not move her head. With her left hand, she slid off the rim and back along the plate until her glove met the valve stem. The angle she wanted was not available to her wrist in this tunnel. Rolling the tank was not possible. The hand came forward and pressed the rim again to hold the one point that had allowed any progress at all. The fine crack she had heard earlier did not repeat. The slot kept its shape and did not open.

Two counts more and the breath she was not taking became a weight. She pulsed the wing dump with a thumb and got no gain; buoyancy was already stripped to the floor. The suit dump sat flat. Any lift would push the valves into the roof.

A hand came in at her calf and bumped twice. Marta. The rhythm of it matched the eight. Elise did not waste breath on a reply. She tightened her triceps and flattened her scapulae until cloth creaked at the seams. The hand moved past her hip, past the plate edge, and wedged into the space by the valve. Marta's forearm took the gap that Elise could not reach.

Pressure on metal. A little force. The squeal of steel against hard edge. Not fast. Not a wrench. A degree. The bind released. Elise pressed her glove once to Marta's forearm, then returned to the rim. The tightness in Elise's chest shifted into a task with numbers. She bled the remaining air through her teeth in a slow exhale that reduced her profile. The angle opened by half the width of her thumb. She moved into it.

The space narrowed further for two body lengths. The rim pressed the left shoulder, then fell away to a ridge. Her mask frame grazed the cold and did not catch. She turned her face into the small field where her cone would go if she allowed it. She did not. Light would show nothing useful in this contact. She gave the slot the least amount of body she could.

Then the pressure eased. Not by much. A hand's distance with a floor under it and a roof that lifted by a rib's height. The groove swung right with the seam. She brought the next breath in, measured. Eight in but not full, seven out, half-beat steady. No cough. No scrape from the roof.

Intercostals stung on the next inhale; pressure along the right side on twist. She counted it as cost and went to work.

Her shoulders shook once from the change in requirement and stopped. She set the cone low and tight and scanned only the field she needed: two rocks, one slot, the edge where a sheet formed a lip. The drip

stream she had left behind had carved a shallow runnel in the dome's underside. Here there was a bead line but no stream.

A glance back showed Marta's cone at the notch where her forearm had been. The hand withdrew. The beam returned to the small world ahead. Elise lifted a palm. Hold. She touched the rim around the exit of the slot in case the shape hid anything a lamp would not reveal. Edges felt true. Not rotten. The breathing behind her was controlled. Kiran's lamp held a small floor patch and did not wander.

The slate came up close to the mask where it would not risk the roof. Gas. E 54 bar. M 51. K 46. She wrote the numbers in quick script. Battery digits next. Her own at 34%. Marta at 21%. Kiran at 35%. She narrowed her cone by another notch to save minutes and made the rotation sign: one wide, two narrow. Marta's cone widened on the next count without wasted gesture. Kiran kept his narrow where it belonged and did not flare it on his own.

The staged cylinder they had already put past the tooth sat ahead of her, tucked by a rock on a line that would not roll it back. She tested it with two fingers and found it held. She felt the seam with her cheek on the right again. A faint sting tracked late and suggested the upward carry they had been promised since the hum had changed. No entry yet. Noise affected every small sensation under this roof. She would not call it until it repeated.

Flattening her profile, she signed Pull with a short tug across her chest. Kiran's left hand appeared at the slot holding the short clean sheath coil in the lay Marta had set. He fed it forward to Elise without slack. His wrist trembled at the end and then steadied when Elise closed two fingers over the sheath and nodded once.

She kept the sheath high of the tooth. The lay closed under tension and the cylinder slid through the slot. The shoulder touched ice where she had expected it to and passed by angle, not force. The cylinder came through and she put it with the first at a line that would give Marta a

straight entry. She set her palm on the floor and felt the grit, then moved it a hand to the left. The small change gained centimeters of working room and took none away from the roof.

The roof groaned again. Not a pulse. A long load that shifted weight through her back. The clearance over her valves measured at perhaps nine millimetres here, seven on the lean during the groan. She measured it without words and held her neck at the angle that preserved it.

Marta's hand came into the beam and signed Go. She pointed to her own chest, then at the slot. Elise took her right hand off the cylinder shoulder and flattened it. Wait. Elise tilted her face, pressed the cheek to the seam again at the slot mouth. Sting on six. Same read. She opened the hand. Go.

Marta did not waste her breath on an eager start. She set her palms where Elise had left prints in grit and matched the shoulder turn, chin low. The exhale was precise and unbroken. Her valves came through without singing on a spur. Her mask did not tap the rim. She placed her knee where Elise had moved the staged cylinder to reduce catch points. She used only the contact points that mattered.

She slid into the pocket beside Elise and settled with no extra movement. Her cone narrowed to a slit and crossed Elise's gloved fingers for one beat. Not a check on Elise. A confirmation of the plan they both held.

Elise raised two fingers at Kiran, then pointed to the slot: next.

Kiran stayed where he belonged, coil against his chest, broken-clip side webbing pinned beneath it. His lamp was steady at the patch he had been given. His breath rode the count and did not chase it. Elise looked at him for a longer beat than she allowed herself in other moments. The eyes in the mask were wide but not lost. He held the coil tighter on the next exhale because he had a job and because his hands worked when the job was simple.

Elise brought the slate up again. She made a short diagram of three bodies in a line with a dot under the third because the order remained the order and the assist under the last was still true. She did not write the words again. She tapped the dot. Kiran closed his hand over the coil and nodded, small and exact.

She set rotation once: Elise wide, Marta narrow, Kiran narrow for thirty fin strokes in one beam; at her forward and swap signs Marta took wide and Elise went narrow while Kiran held his lane. The strobed world when they turned did not exist here because they did not move under rotation; they were still. Elise measured the roof, the drip, the way the seam shifted temperature along her cheek. Then she turned the slate but did not write. A tap on her wrist gauge and a notch tighter on her cone confirmed the expected one bar drop; batteries unchanged. No new marks. Marta brought her cone into the slot to frame the space and left enough shadow for Kiran to read depth. Elise braced her left hand on the floor under the lip where it would not cut her glove and flattened the other across the ceiling to push back if the rim dashed into his path. There was no space to indulge feelings about what he could or could not do. There were only edges and air and the count.

Kiran brought his left shoulder in line with the slot and lifted his chin in the way that was wrong by two degrees. Elise tapped the hood above his temple and tipped his head the other way. He adjusted and his light flickered once and steadied. He closed his eyes briefly for a beat, opened them, and set the coil against his sternum again.

He began his exhale on eight. Good. He moved into the restriction with controlled contact. The first contact came at his left shoulder: a touch, not a jam. Then he flattened and the rim slid over fabric instead of into it. Half a body length in, he spent the last of the exhale early. The contraction in his ribs arrived when the slot demanded smaller and the air was gone. His chest wanted to rise. His hands twitched. The coil tightened against his chest without instruction.

Elise did not let him try to make himself thinner by panic. She reached back with two fingers and hooked his harness web through the slot mouth. Marta had already moved her hand to the base of his cylinder and put pressure in a rotation that would take weight off the valve and give the bottom the line it needed. The squeal of metal did not come; the roof was solid and the angle correct. Kiran's mask touched the rim, not hard, and then lifted a millimetre.

The eyes in his mask rolled up for a fraction of a second when his chest did not expand. It was a short absence. His shoulder ticked under her fingers, a tight ripple through the scapula, then it held. His throat worked once and stilled. Enough to make the hands behind harden on the job and keep them clean. Elise pulled on the harness with a steady force that gave him a forward vector to go with the breath he did not have. Marta turned the base again, a hair only, and Kiran shifted into the shape the tunnel permitted.

Elise pressed two fingers into his scapula through the hood: breath cue. It was not a signal for air that he had not taken. It was a signal for the way he must take it: not all at once. His chest opened when the restriction let it, not before it. His inhale came as a small recovery instead of a lunge. He moved the last hand he had to move and came through the tightest point. He cleared into the pocket on that small inhale; he let a little out, cadence restored.

They settled into the pocket and tightened spacing, ready to move the last stage.

Marta angled her cone off faces and back onto the field. She reached down and touched the knife on her harness to confirm it sat home. The fingers set it. Then shook. A small tremor, two counts long. She closed the hand and put it back on the cylinder shoulder. The tremor was over and the check was done.

A longer groan moved through the ice. The drip line at the dome's underside fattened. A drop separated and ran along the bead line and

then fell. Volume moved out of where they were and into a place they had not yet seen.

She showed the slate with the rotation mark. Marta nodded once. Kiran tapped the edge with two fingers and then returned his hand to the coil so the broken-clip side webbing stayed pinned. Cones and rotation held.

The last staged cylinder was still at the rim behind. Elise signed Pull. Kiran's hand delivered the sheath lay to Marta this time, small and steady. Marta lifted it high of the tooth as if she had always planned to do it that way and drew the cylinder through in a straight, low run. Elise caught the shoulder and placed it beside the other two with no roll-back line.

They had a pocket with three bodies and three staged cylinders. Not a room. A pause point with compression. Restriction cleared; navigation returned to the seam.

She brought her cheek into the seam ahead and waited for the sting that would tell her which of two unhappy directions deserved their work. The seam indicated right again. Faint. With a late sting that repeated once on six, then seven when the groan pressed the roof down. She drew a small line on the slate that showed the rim they were under and a short arrow that marked the seam they felt, not a promise of air but a repeatable cue.

She glanced at her wrist and saw numbers had dropped despite disciplined breathing. The instrument showed a time budget that pauses would not return. She wiped the moisture from the face with a knuckle and kept the numbers to herself. The ledger stayed current; movement held until conditions changed.

She flattened a hand, pulled the cones in, and showed the forward sign. Rotation: Kiran wide this time for thirty strokes to widen the pool of vision for his hands. Elise and Marta narrow. The beams flickered a little with the change. Elise kept the count steady so their bodies did not try to

reconcile two timings at once.

They moved. Not far. Not fast. Enough to keep the body ahead of CO₂ without taxing the gas that numbers measured. The floor was a field of crushed shells and silt that took fin wash and made it a hazard if they forgot the smallness of their profiles. The roof shifted with load. Clearances changed with the adjacent water.

At six fin strokes, she felt the right seam flatten. At eight, it stung again. The read stayed fickle. She did not break trim to correct now. She took the angle that would put them into the next pocket where the read might repeat.

They passed under a thin hanging sheet. Valves at the right angle cleared it by the amount her neck allowed them to clear. Marta skimmed it with the edge of her cone and did not lift her jaw. Kiran's light held his patch and did not wander. His movements stayed controlled.

The pocket beyond was not larger. It offered a little offset to the left and an opening that dropped by the height of a hand and then rose again to a roof with pale striations. She set the slate on her knee for one count, then clipped it away; cones stayed tight, rotation unchanged.

A shadow to the left suggested a secondary channel: smaller, darker, with a trick of current that read more like a sink than a draw. Marta pointed up instead of left and held the palm flat to say, not here. Elise put her cheek to the seam above and counted to eight. On six, a faint lift slid across her right cheekbone out of sequence with the groan. It could have been noise. Then it repeated once on the same count when the roof had gone quiet. Not noise. Not yet a map. Enough for a small arrow on a slate and a move.

She signalled the rotation again. Elise wide. Marta narrow. Kiran narrow. They moved into the upward read with the formation so tight that elbows nearly brushed. Elise felt Kiran's shoulder a fraction below hers, the broken-clip side still pinned under the coil he refused to let go. The touch did not distract. It confirmed alignment.

The roof dropped, reducing clearance by a millimetre, then eased back. A bead formed in the dome above and ran along a line that trended to the right. Bubbles from their exhale traced that line with a soft clatter and slid out of sight along the roof. She did not follow them with her light; the lights had to stay low and narrow.

She brought the slate up and wrote the smallest words she allowed herself: Up-seam holds, indexed to the arrow from earlier. She did not box it. She wrote the numbers again: Battery: E 30% / M 18% / K 33% , digits faint in the cold; she tightened the cone a notch. Gas: E 47 / M 45 / K 40. Rotation held.

Kiran's breathing sat on the seven again, with the half-beat at the end fixed, exact. He did not cough. His hands did the jobs they had been given and not one more. When his light drifted a little out of the lane, she tapped his shoulder and it returned. He looked at her and not past her, and that was steadiness.

They came to a bend where the seam rose and the roof cut across it at an angle that would force a choice. Left again into the smaller dark, or keep following a rise too shallow to be generous. Marta put two fingers up, not left, and kept them there. Elise placed her cheek to the roof and waited the eight. The sting arrived late, then again in the same place when the next water load pushed through. She nodded once and set her palm forward. They followed the rise.

Lamp range reduced as batteries dropped under load and cold. They held the rotation and kept their cones from grazing walls they did not need to see.

They moved into a space that lifted by the height of a knuckle and then held level. The sound that filled it was not the chamber roar from before but the small continuous drip and the sheet's faint rub on her regulator hose where it lay close to her cheek. She lifted the hose a hand's width and set it back in a path that the sheet would not abrade. A tool becomes a hazard at the wrong angle; this was the right angle.

She felt the hum again across her ribs, lower and broader than the hum that had sent them into the narrow thread hours earlier. She did not let the hum replace the cheek read; she let it support it. She drew a short triangle with a dot on the slate. Different context. Same method. If it proved wrong later, the mark would tell her where the mistake had begun.

They carried on. Three bodies, six cylinders. Head count and tank count unchanged. Digits shifted. They kept moving with the update.

The next roof flex came with a sound that filled the pocket and did not settle in one place, a weight shifting across unseen volumes. The bead line ran faster and then slowed to its prior pace. Elise stayed with the count while her pulse jumped. Her breath did not break the half-beat. Kiran's did not either. Marta's hand twitched toward the short remnant clipped on her harness, old habit; she stopped and kept her fingers on the cylinder shoulder where it belonged.

A narrow flex in the floor formed a slope. Elise lowered her knees and moved with it; pushing straight across would waste clearance. The cheek read led their faces into a space she had measured with skin before light confirmed it. She kept attention on tasks that kept control.

The corridor ahead narrowed into a cross seam too thin to be a comfort and too open to be called tight. Elise closed her palm and brought them to stillness. She tilted her head, cheek to seam, and waited for six. The sting came late again and held. She raised her chin one degree to listen for how it changed when her face changed. It did not change in direction. Only in timing, and timing could be attributed to the groan that ran through the roof in the same second. She kept the arrow she had written.

Elise moved first, because her shoulders knew the map the roof made. Marta followed at a distance measured in half-arms. Kiran stayed in the middle and did not let his hands try to solve the seam. He kept to the seam and avoided extra movement.

At the end of that run, she turned the slate and did not write anything new. The next decision was beyond the light they owned now. She put the slate away and put both hands where they did the most: one on the line of her own body, the other touching the roof where she would feel the shift in pressure faster than a lamp could show it.

She did not assume more than the readings supported. She kept plans tied to what conditions confirmed. She followed the seam with her cheek and led them where the sting went.

The drip held. The roof stayed low. The cones stayed narrow. They moved forward; retreat was closed and the seam held. They carried the numbers into the next pocket and kept the ledger current.

The upward read sharpened by one degree when the floor fell away to a lip, and their bubbles threaded right and disappeared faster than before. She kept her exhale controlled and did not over-breathe. A lift ran across her right cheek and held for two counts; on the next cycle it returned in the same place. She drew a short arrow on the slate to that seam as a repeatable cue and moved into it.

Chapter 9

Surface Signal

The water ahead changed colour without changing shape. Elise saw it first as a weak false-blue along the roof seam. The thin hanging sheet under the roof still drifted right; beyond it the weak false-blue spread. Not lamp. Not the thin light of a head beam under strain. A wash that did not swing when they did. It lay flat across the ice in a faint band and made the bubble stream slipping along the roof run faster and then vanish.

Flat palm up. Hold. Marta stopped with precision. Kiran's shoulders rose once, then steadied as two fingers pressed his scapula on eight.

Cheek to the seam; waited for the sting to declare direction rather than noise. Six counts. On seven a colder thread brushed under the hood edge left to right. Then a lift, not cold, on the right cheekbone that arrived out of sequence with the last long groan. Waited again to confirm. The second read matched the first: faint lift on six when the roof was quiet, a repeat on seven when it loaded. Up-seam held toward the glow. Probe stayed pocketed. The water here was full of fines that would flicker digits more than inform.

She wiped her wrist instrument with a knuckle. The face cleared to numbers and a red band. DECO. Required: 6 m 14 min. 3 m 18 min. TTS rising, not falling. The little ladder of stop bars scrolled a fraction while she watched. Gas did not justify the ladder. Not here.

Marta's hand entered her cone and cut across her own instrument, a sharp horizontal through the red and a decisive up-arrow. Ignore. Up. It was not flippant. It was the logic of numbers faced with other numbers.

Elise answered with a flat palm and held it there until Marta's fingers stilled. She brought the slate in tight to her chest where it would not kiss the roof. She wrote with the pencil's lead stuttering in cold plastic: Gas (bar): E 44 / M 42 / K 38. She circled the lowest. Below it: Battery: E 29% / M 17% / K 32%. She did not add boxes or arrows. The digits did the talking. She signed the lamp rotation per protocol, one wide, two narrow, while digits still held.

Kiran's eyes were on the washed band under the ice. They reflected the pale colour in a way that made them look larger. His hands gathered the short sheath coil he still held against his chest and his elbows came in. On the next inhale his shoulders ticked upward. Elise had the harness webbing already in her hand. She took the load in her fist and pressed two fingers into his scapula on eight. His shoulders dropped. The breath on seven went out long, steady, with the half-beat at the end.

The ice above carried a tone that did not move in pulses. Pressure translated through the roof and pressed across their backs. The bead line on the dome ahead thickened, then strings of beads coalesced and ran. Clearance over her valves did not change by a finger. It changed by a millimetre. She adjusted the angle of her neck because that millimetre could take a mask frame into a catch.

Air moved through her hoses with a hiss she had lived by for years. In this pocket the hiss sounded closer to her teeth. The taste carried metal. Not from the regulator. From CO₂ debt.

She showed the slate to Marta, then to Kiran. No one moved a hand without cause. Marta's jaw tightened in the mask, then loosened. Kiran gave a small, exact nod and kept his cone on the patch of floor she had given him.

The glow was not a promise. It was a condition. The ice had admitted sky or water in one place. Duration was unknown.

She took the cheek to the seam again, careful to move only her face to keep the water calm. The lift said the same. Right cheekbone on six, again

on seven during the load. She indexed the direction with a small arrow on the slate tied to the rim line she had drawn earlier. The up-seam aligned with the glow.

She looked again at the wrist. DECO. 6 m 14. 3 m 18. TTS 36 and creeping.

Marta's hand slid into view again and hovered. She did not cut the sign across the numbers a second time. She waited. That was respect. That was pressure.

Elise lifted her palm with the fingers spread to say only: wait. She counted a full eight, tracking systems: cold in the hands, CO₂ up, roof low, batteries falling, gas in last thirds, glow ahead, load on the roof. She put them in that order and matched her breath to it.

She tapped the slate margin twice by the arrow and held her palm up. Kiran matched her breath again on seven and the little tremor at his fingertips stilled for a beat.

They were at the brink of a choice that did not split right and wrong. It split science from survival and paid for either with a body.

She rolled her wrist a fraction so the instrument caught the faint glow ahead. Red stayed red.

She closed her hand. Hold.

Assessment ended. Choice demanded.

Marta lifted her hand from the floor and pointed to Kiran. Then with a finger she sketched a narrow ledge on her open palm, a clear shallow where a body might lie still under a roof. She tapped Kiran again and put him on that drawn shelf with two pushes of a finger. Then she stabbed upward with a forefinger, once to Elise's chest, once to her own. Her other hand made stop bars in the water and then flicked them out of the

way. Leave him to complete stops. We go for air.

Elise did not let the proposal live for a full count. A thumb shifted on the slate edge for a half-beat. She made a fist. One. She touched the fist to each of their chests. Two, three. Then she lifted that fist and opened it into a single up-arrow that crossed all three touches and did not pause at any imagined stop marker. The movement was small and clean and it filled the world she would allow them to have.

Kiran tried to speak and failed, the mouthpiece turning whatever word had been there into movement. His hand lifted and flattened against his chest, then dropped. He had been given the job he could do. The job was to be carried through and to keep breathing to the rhythm that matched the roof.

A creak ran across the roof sheet, a thin line of sound that dragged a little and then let go. Fine white grains drifted from the sheet near the glow and fell in a slow curtain. The bead line brightened. Clearance shifted by the width of a nail.

Marta tapped her temple once, sharp, then brought her flat hand down as if to cut a knot: choose now. She was not wrong. Hesitation is a tool only when it buys a better angle. Else it buys failure.

Elise met her gaze and did not alter her breath. She drew the slate up and set the edge against the base of her thumb. The pencil made a single continuous up-arrow through a stack of small bars she drew for the stops. She crossed the bars with the arrow so there was no confusion. No-stop ascent. Sprint.

The word did not sound in water. It landed anyway. Marta's face did not change. She nodded once and the nod turned the three of them back into the machine they knew how to be.

Elise turned the slate and rebuilt the world to match the choice. On the margin she sketched a band at a hand's width below the roof and another band a hand and a half lower. She pointed at them and made a chopping motion over her own chest, the sign for symptoms, then tapped

her ear and brushed both elbows. Then she drew two short lines, each the length of a finger, across the bands. Minimal checks only if bodies insisted. Checks minimal at 6 m band: joint prick, skin mottling. If present: reduce ascent rate by one count or abort. She wrote a small 'E' at the bottom and drew a line to a dot and then to a small rectangle that marked Kiran. Leash. She made a scapula tap sign for breath cue. She drew a line up to Marta's mark ahead: point. She tapped the pencil to each symbol and looked at each of them.

Marta placed two fingers against her own forearm where the knife sat and then put that hand back to the field. Control check, not a threat. She slid the cone toward the glow and kept it low and narrow. Kiran tapped the slate corner twice and lifted the coil against his chest where the broken-clip side webbing still sat pinned under it. He set his shoulders square inside the small world they would give him.

They reattached stages with the least possible movement. No wasted reaches. Boltsnaps clicked and sat. Elise checked Kiran's on the broken-clip side because that was where webbing lied and lift found it. Marta ghosted her fingers across her own and then Kiran's in a single sweep without making work of it.

Elise looked once more at the instrument. The red band had added a number. She did not write that number. She wrote only gas because gas moved them or it did not. E 42 / M 39 / K 35. She did not circle the lowest this time. There was no decision to be made about that number anymore. She showed it. Kiran's jaw moved once, not to make sound, but to settle the mouthpiece, and his eyes came back to her hands.

She touched the seam with her cheek again. Lift on six across the right. Confirmed. She flattened her hand and pointed at Marta. Go point. Marta moved without sliding her fin tips through silt.

They turned toward the glow. Instruments still showed red. The roof set the limit. They would take air instead of stops. She accepted the cost.

Elise clipped a spare double-ender to her left chest D-ring, ran a 0.5 m cord to Kiran's left chest D-ring, and tested the load. She took up slack and tested the clip with a steady pull. The span was short, just over half a metre, enough to keep him where she could feel him and take his load if his feet started to run to the light again. The clack of the snap was quiet in water. The leash matched her earlier signs. No one stays.

Marta slid forward. Her cone made a thin corridor of light along the seam under the roof without showing them any more wall than they needed. Her wrist rolled once to take a shadow off a small lip that would catch a mask if a head came up uncontrolled. She did not change pace. She did not narrate to them what the wall was like. She removed its ability to surprise them.

Kiran looked at the clip linking him to Elise. His eyes large in the mask for one count, then normal. He brought his lamp back to his assigned patch. His breath rode seven and the half-beat held.

Elise pulsed the wing inflator once, just a whisper, to break the floor's drag, kept the suit flat to avoid ballooning, and paired it with low, count-matched finning. Wing pulse 0.5 s; vent matched on expansion; halocline lens thinned by 3 cm.

The hiss of instruments was small. The hiss of her own regulator was constant. The taste still had metal in it from CO₂. Her ribs ached where they had scraped the slot. She kept the ache separate. It would not choose for them.

Marta raised her palm and brought it up as a slicing arrow to mark the cadence for the first metres. Not a flourish. A tool. Elise matched the timing to the long roof load. Move on the lift, slide when the weight receded a fraction. She would not let roof pulses drive their contact with it.

The first movement upward was not a kick. It was a change in relationship to the water. Elise eased her hips down and her chest up a degree and breathed an inhale that stopped before it would have rounded her ribs. She sent the exhale on seven and held the half-beat. The leash took a small load as Kiran followed that exhale with her.

A crack ran ahead and left, a thin, rising frequency across the roof sheet. White fines drifted down in a sparse curtain. Elise moved Marta's angle with two fingers so they would pass below a small plate that had firm edges and did not shed. Marta read the correction as if she had thought of it first and made it clean.

Elise brought the slate up one last time before lamp digits died and wrote the batteries: E 25% / M 16% / K 31%. She nodded toward the glow to mark their replacement for light. Marta made a small circle with her forefinger to say, rotate as needed; Elise flicked two fingers to approve and then closed the slate away. From this point, rotation would be by feel and need rather than counts, because the counts no longer cared what their lamps tried to do.

She checked her wrist: TTS +1; E 39 / M 36 / K 32.

She placed her cheek to the seam one more time on the move, careful not to turn her head enough to change clearance. Lift on six. It repeated on seven. She pointed Marta a degree to the right to stay with it. Bubbles traced that line to the roof and ran along it, pulling away faster than before toward the pale colour. Direction and glow agreed.

They were no longer still. It was not a leap. They turned hundreds of small control corrections into a rise. Her hand stayed on Kiran's leash. It was warm through the glove where his body heat came through the webbing. Not comfort. Data.

Another slow load pressed across their backs from larger water beyond. The bead line swelled and ran. Elise kept the inhale from rounding her ribs. The leash tightened and loosened in tiny pulses that matched the count. On eight she tapped Kiran's scapula without looking

and his breath laid down under her hand.

A brine curtain bled off a seam and pushed at their cheeks. It tasted sharper through the hood. Elise adjusted two degrees left to avoid where it would press them back downward. Marta's cone barely changed. The world moved on small angles and breaths.

Their lamps gave them less with every metre. Elise narrowed her cone until it was almost a wire. Marta carried the only wide; Kiran kept his slit where it covered his own tools and the leash. The turquoise ahead did not need a battery. It needed them to be there before the opening narrowed again.

Elise's wrist computer scrolled again. It could not pull them to stops. It could only show the cost. She accepted the new number and kept moving. She would pay if the body presented the bill.

Kiran's fin clipped a low lip. He corrected without pulling away from the leash. He looked once at Elise's hand, then back to his patch. The correction was clean and he did not overpay for it with air.

They slid under a curtain of thin ice. The valves cleared because the exhale was timed, because the head was down, because the neck had learned where to be. Marta's cone grazed the edge of the curtain and did not lift her jaw. Elise felt the plastic of her mask lightly kiss the sheet when the long tone pressed. She kept the exhale soft and the leash pulled Kiran through on the same softness.

A column of colder water dropped across her right cheek and did not stay. The lift was still on six and seven. The glow ahead was no longer a band. It was an opening. A distance easy to misjudge if you let it drive your legs.

She tapped the leash with two fingers and Kiran twitched a nod against it. She felt his compliance through the webbing. The tap had always been a better instruction to him than a point.

Elise counted eight four times and at the top of the fourth cycle tasted the metallic edge sharpen. She did not cough. She held the half-beat where it belonged. She moved Marta another degree right as a seam curved under the roof toward the bright opening.

The hissing in her ears was fixed. The quiet in everything else was the loudest thing she owned. Her body gave clearer readings than any instrument when the lights ran thin.

Movement became ascent. The band became an opening defined by where the roof broke. Elise kept each kick on the beat. On six. Half-beat hold.

She lifted her chin by a degree only when clearance lifted. She did not move her jaw under the mouthpiece. She did not give the mask an edge to find.

The leash tightened as Kiran took half a breath in a place that did not permit it. She tapped his scapula with the back of her fingers in the rhythm they had been using since they were in the maze, and he let the half-breath go. He would need all of what his chest could hold soon. He did not need any of it under the wrong roof.

Marta's palm cut up sharply and their bodies answered on the same count without Elise needing to raise her own hand. They were no longer checking instruments or drawings. They were executing an ascent they would have to live with.

She kept the mask frame low at the edge of the opening and used her head only to move air behind her teeth. The entry into the brighter water was not up. It was forward. Clearance permitted it. For now.

They began to rise.

The slate banged once against her chest and she put a palm on it without looking down. In another span she would be tracking faces, not numbers. For now only the upward vector mattered.

Marta's back stayed level as she threaded the lip that led toward whatever open shape lay above the opening. Elise followed, keeping Kiran where she could feel the changes in his shoulders in her fingers through the leash. Regulator hiss stayed steady. The glow got stronger on her glove backs. Batteries fell by the minute.

She did not speak. There was nothing for words to do in water at that depth that breath and numbers had not already accomplished. Roof reflectance increased; bubbles along the seam accelerated.

They climbed into it.

Depth eased by 1.5 m; TTS +2; Batteries E 24% / M 15% / K 30%.
Count on six.

Chapter 10

Hypoxic Sprint

The leash stayed tight and straight across the water. Elise felt the load through glove and webbing, a warm strip against the cold where Kiran's body heat came through. She matched her breathing to the roof and used the count. Eight in, not full. Seven out. Half-beat held. The leash tightened on her exhale and eased as he followed. It kept their spacing true.

The polynya's light lay ahead as a pale band along the roof seam, a colour more than a shape. Marta's cone lit a corridor under it without wasting lumen on walls. Bubbles ran hard along the ice, accelerated, and vanished into the band. The roof carried a low tone that sat in her jaw. All cues pointed up, and control stayed tight.

Gas numbers were already on the slate. She did not look again yet. Her wrist still showed red across the stop ladder. Stop bars stayed red while clearance tightened overhead. She fixed the order in her body and moved them through the water.

The first pull she made was small and precise. She did not muscle it, because muscling scattered legs and silt and accuracy both. She used cadence. The count controlled it. On her next seven-out, she pressed two fingers into Kiran's scapula and felt his shoulder relax the fraction it needed. That gave the leash slack to become a guide and not a dragline.

Her thighs burned. Quadriceps lit and stayed lit. The cold in the suit made lactic burn feel thin, spread. Not dramatic. She kept her breathing steady for all of it. She kept the shape of each exhale inside the right frame for clearance under the roof. Lungs empty enough to narrow ribs; not empty enough to trigger a cough. The hood pressed hard against her

skull at each long groan and eased during the brief lifts. She moved on lifts. She slid on less.

Marta altered angle a degree to starboard over two beats; Elise felt the line of the seam in the cheek-lift a second later. Water carried a faint upward push across her right cheekbone on six. It repeated on seven when the roof bent. Timing stayed consistent. She did not bring the probe out; fines in the water would give her nothing she trusted. Skin was enough. She kept that sting aligned under her eye and matched Marta's set. The bubble trail agreed and ran faster into the light.

She brought the leash closer to her chest and shortened the span by half a finger. Kiran's fin clipped a low nub. He corrected without pulling away from her hand. He returned to the patch of floor she had given him to light and kept it there. Obedience was not submission in this context. It was survival.

The exertion pulled other levers. Cold diuresis arrived with ache and pressure she could not address. The p-valve took it out fast; warmth gone in seconds. Mouth dryness sharpened. Not heat-thirst. A chemical edge from CO₂ debt and time under load. She kept the count even. Her left calf threatened a cramp. She flattened toes for three beats and set the ankle to ease the pull without changing knees or wasting forward vector. It subsided. She did not spend a word on it. The cost was paid.

A brown ribbon drifted into Marta's corridor. It read as weed, wrack drawn into the under-ice by a winter eddy and pinned three handspans below the roof. One end hung free and twisted. Marta's left forearm lifted, two fingers cut the hold sign, and in the next second her right hand found the knife. Clean draw, wrist angle low. The blade met the ribbon once and parted it near its anchor on a rough nub. The cut piece dropped and then slid away in slow water. No one touched the roof to do it. Knife seated again. Path regained. The entire act used less than one breath cycle and bought them more.

The bubbles along the roof changed tone as they climbed a fraction nearer to the band. They hammered and bounced in their own noise. Sound came back at a slight angle and overstated movement. The rebounded bubble sheet turned the pale band into an indistinct fog. Elise felt the pull in her inner ear and corrected by closing down to what mattered. Eight, seven, half-beat. Hips down a degree on the long tone. Chin low when the roof lowered. She touched the roof with the back of her gloved hand for one count to read pressure, then cleared it on the next lift.

Kiran's exhale shortened. The trace at his mouth became choppy. He began to lift against the leash with tiny half-breaths where the roof did not allow. She slid two fingers under his scapula and pressed in their rhythm. He found the half-beat again and lengthened his seven. His eyes fixed to his own patch where his cone still held, narrow and obedient. The leash no longer set concern. It resumed being a tool.

When pain moved from background to foreground, it did not announce itself with a shout. It arrived in her left hand as a leak. The glove seam under her thumb pad let a sheet of colder water flood into the lining. She indexed its route up her wrist and circled the hand to keep fingers flexing. Not too much movement. Enough to prevent claw. The cold made the phrase banal and absolute at once. It numbed through a scale she knew well. Stab, ache, dull, misfire. She ran the map in advance and beat it by a half-beat, not with prediction. She did not look at the glove. She let the cold take its space and did not give it structure beyond the one it had.

Ahead, a hanging veil of silt waited where a deeper corridor pushed fines up into the seam. Marta's cone cropped under it with a patience that would not be read as hesitation even by a diver with fewer dives than Kiran. The veil cut their field to a hand ahead. The band above was hidden by particulate and bubble sheet. Elise pressed her cheek into water that tasted thicker. Sting on six across the right. Late repeat on seven. Same direction. She felt the leash take a fraction more load as

Kiran lost the benefit of being able to see a goal and wanted to rush. Her fingers absorbed the urge and sent him her count through the scapula. When he tried to anticipate an opening, she took the leash gently left and was corrected by the sting which asked for right. Adjusted. No lamp could give what the cheek gave in that span. They went that way.

Battery digits were hard to see at this output. Her own read edged E 23% when she brought it up between counts as she slid a hand to re-check clearance. Marta's read M 14% while she kept point. Kiran's was K 28% as he held the coil tight to his chest. The numbers had weight because they were small. But the corridor had its own light now and the lamps were no longer the primary plan. She rotated to a narrower arc that would not save much but would stretch her cell away from a cliff. Marta kept the only wide cone. When she lost it, they would still go. Planning did not pretend otherwise.

Sound shifted from broad to localized and back again as unseen shapes moved above them. A low roll passed through the roof and into her sternum. She turned her head a fraction to keep the exhale controlled; an uncontrolled exhale could trigger a cough when CO₂ edged; a cough under a roof was an edge catching hazard. She kept the air behind her teeth and used a controlled nasal exhale into the mask that did not lift the skirt.

They cleared the silt veil into slightly cleaner water. The band's edges reappeared. The leash slackened without becoming an invitation. Elise touched her cheek to the seam and got the same cue. Up on six across the right. The glove leak made that cheek feel warmer by contrast. She used the good side when it counted and kept the left hand moving just enough to avoid digits locking. A rescue is a chain of avoided small locks.

Another long pulse moved through the roof. The bead line ahead thickened and ran in a sheet. The tone did not settle; it carried weight and then eased. She slid them under it on seven-out, shoulder angle set so the mask would not find the edge. Marta flattened her profile a degree when the lift came back. Clean.

She tasted more metal. The head space above her eyes felt tight. She did not swallow. It would be wasted movement. She closed them for one count and let the band form again. The band existed even when not seen. She had learned in other ice that consistency of invisible features is the only thing that lets you trust your skin when instruments become unreliable.

Gas again. She did not check. She knew they had paid a few bars for the silt and for the wrack ribbon and for the tiny corrections she had to make to put a body in the right water. She would look when something external forced a decision. Numbers are tools for choices, not for obsession.

The leash tugged a fraction and stopped. She pressed Kiran's scapula again. He answered with a longer exhale and matched her half-beat. His eyes no longer hunted the bright. They stayed on his task. Obedience made him smaller in some contexts. In this context, it made him safe.

They climbed.

The roof changed without warning. Not the long steady load they had been feeling. A hit that carried fast and focused. The sound ran like a splitting line through the ice sheet to their right and back over their heads toward the band. Elise felt the water lift and squeeze. A slab ahead dropped a fraction of a body. It did not fall free. It tilted and took space, turning a gentle plane into a wedge with a lower left edge.

Marta's palm cut a precise hold. She slid sideways into the tiny corridor that remained and lifted her chin just enough to avoid banging the mask into the slab. The polynya band dissolved into bubbles. Sound returned off the tilted plane in a way that made motion seem wrong by a hand.

Elise answered the hold and kept the leash tight to her chest so Kiran would not surge toward the glow. She did the maths on timing. A moving roof promises you an opening if you don't get impatient and get hurt in the wrong place for the wrong reason. She counted two full eight-cycles. Fifteen seconds in practice by their cadence. Not science. Enough to let the slab speak and either settle or continue.

Her wrist added another minute to TTS while she waited. It read the pause as time at depth. The ladder wasn't the debt that mattered. She used the red strip on the screen to measure a different thing: how much argument she had left with her own body before it refused to ignore a cough or an ache.

Marta pressed her forearm against the edge to keep position. The edge was rough with frozen salts and a feathered layer. When the slab lifted a centimetre and tried to become a door, it scraped against her suit. The fabric made a dry sound in water. Marta did not flinch. She used knees only as much as the rub demanded to avoid a catch and then returned to flat.

The bubble sheet on the underside of the slab finally thinned. The band re-formed as a smudged oval. Marta feathered through along the higher side first, then rotated back on the inside to bring the corridor into the right plane for Elise. Elise moved on a lift without changing the count and slipped past the slab edge. The edge hissed a little against her regulator hose. She took the hose in two fingers and set it higher for two strokes. When she released, the hose stayed where it needed to. She brushed the roof with the back of her hand and read pressure. The slab was not moving down again immediately. She halved their rise per lift to keep the ceiling behaviour predictable. Ceiling behaviour led; ascent speed followed. This was the moment to pay speed and buy distance.

Kiran's breathing hiked again when his mask shadow crossed the slab. The mask made a tiny sound against his cheek edge at a pressure change. His exhale shortened at the edges. She felt it more than saw it. Before he made a habit of it, she lengthened her own exhale by a

half-count and pressed his scapula in the elongated rhythm. He matched, then fell off, then matched, then matched without help. Length bought him air and bought her clearance.

As Elise came around the slab, her own knuckles touched the edge. A knuckle of ice bit through suit weave. Not a tear. The nerve spiked once and faded. She made one unnecessary fist and then stopped herself making a habit of that too. Habits have to serve physics, not feeling.

Marta brushed her forearm against a second nub on exit. The contact was not clean. She took it on the meat of the forearm not the wrist. She turned the arm slightly to avoid slicing the suit. The move cost nothing but made a mark. She winced. Not show. Not perform. A factual reaction that she did not play for sympathy. She had point. She kept it.

The hold had been brief. Gas spent for it had to be accepted as the cost of not cracking skulls on a moving roof. Elise forwarded the logic to her breath and made that breath move them faster. She did not change the number of breaths. She changed the efficiency of each without changing the depth of the exhale beyond what would get her into a cough. It was the kind of marginal correction that would not be seen in a log later but could mean not bleeding a minute into the wrong pocket.

Numbers now. She made herself look and not flinch from using them. The controls were set. The numbers either supported the plan or argued against it. Wrist: TTS +3 on the last ease of depth. Deco still red in two bands. Gas: E 35 bar. She turned her wrist for Marta. Marta flashed M 33 with a tilt of her wrist in answer. Kiran showed K 29 when Elise lifted his arm and angled his gauge. He didn't try to interpret it. He looked to her scapula cue instead and breathed when she told him to. It was the correct division of labour.

They passed underneath a fast run of bubbles trapped under the slab that moved around toward the band. The bubble stream threw them false motion cues. Elise had been in blackwater that distorted vision; she used that memory to reduce trust in seeing and gave trust to what her skin said

against the roof and what the leash said in her hand.

She marked the cheek sting again. Six across the right. A slight flattening on seven with weight. The path had not changed. A new tone rose. The vector remained. She obeyed it.

The space lifted a shallow hand. Enough to give Marta a fraction more confidence to widen the cone and search for more snags. She found none. The cone narrowed again. A wave of fines drifted past from their right and veiled them, but not as thick as before. They moved with little else to read. When the roof tone went flat, energy still built out of range. She stayed ready for the next flex.

The left glove leak grew mean at the index finger. She rotated the wrist to keep blood moving. She curled each finger in turn against the palm and pushed into the neoprene. The move left small burns of feeling behind. “Do not fix what doesn’t break you” was a rule she knew without writing. She didn’t attempt to reseal the seam. Any attempt would cost more minutes than a warmed hand would regain.

Calves threatened again. This time at the right. She adjusted ankle angle while keeping the count. The threat eased. Squinting the eyes into a hurt was a habit she cut from her body because it changed face shape under the mask and made catching easier. Instead she used the structure she owned: spine, hips, breath. Those stayed true.

She gave Kiran one more scapula press at the end of the segment to keep him from running the last metre to the light. He obeyed. Not because he was compliant by nature; because he had been trained to trust the cue that kept him alive.

They climbed again, toward cleaner light.

The light failed when they could not afford to trade it for nothing. Marta's wide cone had been at fifteen, then thirteen, then twelve percent. It held steadier than Elise expected. Then it began to blink. One pulse strong, two dim, three weak, then it settled into a low glow the width of a hand. Ghost output. The corridor collapsed from their lamps into what the polynya offered: a muted turquoise that did not depend on them.

Marta slid one half-body lower to keep her hands in water that gave feedback instead of depending on light. She widened both palms and held them near the roof to read clearance with skin. She kept moving. Lamps are instruments. Their failure signals not an end but a change of tool use.

She brought her cheek back to the seam and felt the lift again on six, then indexed her head to it and moved Marta a degree right with two fingers. Marta took it without looking back. Bubbles crawled and spun above them as they ran along the roof. The turquoise band brightened by a margin that had nothing to do with their lamps. The opening was closer.

The leash went hard without warning. Kiran jerked to a stop. The span tightened against Elise's chest. She felt the change not as a tug but as a loss of elasticity. He had become a fixed point instead of a follower. She did not yank. She froze her body shape and held position on a roof lift to avoid pushing him deeper into whatever had caught him. She knew the feel of a snag. When a diver stopped of his own accord, water around the body changed tone in a way the leash transmitted: taut on one end and slack on the other.

She reached along the leash and put her hand on the webbing that ran to his chest D-ring. Not the coil. The coil was still flat where they had set it since the throat. The snag was lower. She slid her hand down along the stage cylinder and found the tail strap. It had drifted longer than she liked in the speed of ascent and found a lip on the floor that rose under the roof's slope. The strap had ticked under and was held by the angle more than by any hook.

Marta dropped under the lip before Elise asked. She put her shoulders under the cylinder and her right hand on the strap. She did not cut; a cut would send the strap free to snag elsewhere and change Kiran's balance. She yanked once, decisive, in the angle that the lip allowed. It did not come. She changed her hand position by a thumb and tried again, her left knee on the floor to give proper counterforce. The strap tore free with a rough pop that Elise felt through the leash before she heard it through water. Marta pushed the strap into Kiran's hand as she rose and flattened to the roof again, and he pinned the tail under the coil.

On the same motion, Elise took the leash tight and pulled a half-body. Kiran followed into the space Marta had made, and they reoccupied the same plane without rising or falling. The manoeuvre had cost them a handful of seconds and a handful of breaths. It had prevented a heap under the roof and the kind of entanglement that costs bodies.

Rib pain arrived on the next movement. Not a line. A point. Sharp, right side. The intercostals had been overstretched in the throat. The muscle had been making its complaint for spans. This one spoke with a different register. She took the breath she was due and it tried to trigger a cough. A cough would drive the mask into the sheet and abrade or lift it. She suppressed it with a controlled nasal exhale into the mask that did not lift the skirt. Pain spiked under the right ribs and then settled to a steady ache.

The roof above them carried a tearing sound. It ran long across the sheet, then stopped on a brief hold. The band's shape changed by a hand where the tearing had passed. The shape of the opening became more defined and less stable behind that definition. It did not indicate the roof was about to close in this place. It made clear the place to be was a metre forward, under that lip where the shape forced the next move.

Gas. She could not defer it anymore. She turned her wrist and made the numbers part of the decision. E 31. Marta checked in with M 29 by a tilt of her wrist. Kiran's gauge read K 26. He lifted it towards her face without trying to decode it. He watched her hand instead for the scapula

cue. She gave the cue and made the exhale longer than her ribs liked. He matched it. The numbers didn't argue with the plan. They underlined it in black pencil.

Marta's light had become a smear around her hand. Elise's was not much more. Kiran's narrow slit did what he had been told to do with it: light the coil, the leash, the hardware at his chest, the floor where his fins could catch nothing. The polynya did the rest. The band was no longer a wash. It was an edge. The black inside the band had density, and the line where it met ice had form her hands knew would cut if they misjudged it.

Kiran's finning stopped contributing. It failed quietly. His legs were not dead; they had turned from propulsion to an unhelpful suggestion. The leash told her before his feet did that he was no longer giving them lift. Weight came to her collarbones and into her hips through the harness. She did not change the count. She took him as another cylinder. The work did not change.

Marta saw it and moved to give her a cleaner corridor. She did not overcompensate. She lowered her palms a hand to give feedback and brought her own breath into the same longer exhale shape. It calmed water.

The glove leak in Elise's left hand made the fingers a set of slow tools. She flexed them and then closed them again. The leash rested in the web of the thumb and the index where some warmth still lived. The line between clammy and numb had been crossed some minutes before. She kept the hand in the same position because changing it would cost accuracy. Pain that threatens accuracy is cost. Pain that stays out of accuracy is handled by continuing.

The band's lip arrived. It didn't move toward them or away. They moved to it; it stayed where it was. Elise pressed her cheek to the seam one last time and felt the lift on six. It confirmed that the vector still ran directly to the lip. She was not about to angle into a blind gutter or a plate that reflected a second-hand light.

Her wrist showed TTS +5. The stop bars stacked into the same two bands she had already crossed out on the slate with a drawn arrow. That note lived in her breathing and timing now, not just on plastic. Gas: E 29. She opened her hand, turned it over and back, and did not try to crack the world into sub-decisions. The big decision had been made earlier. The rest was execution.

She shortened the leash by a hand until Kiran's shoulder almost touched hers. She moved her right hand from the leash to his harness and held the webbing there. She pressed two fingers into his scapula and aligned his mouthpiece envelope in the same angle as hers under the roof. His eyes looked at the black edge under the band. He did not ask it to be anything else.

Marta set herself an arm forward and marked the lip with a narrow cone so that the very edge was visible only as a difference between pale and dark. She tilted her wrist up to show a hand and then sliced it upward on the count. No flourish. Just cadence. The slab behind them might move again. That was the only reason to honour the count more than the number on the instrument. The count would get them clean contact with the opening and not a graze of the mask frame against the sheet.

Elise matched the slice and kept her head angle such that the frame presented no edge to the ice until it had to. She did not re-check her ribs. They would tell her if they were going to become something that changed the plan. Pain added no new data as she made the next exhale.

She tasted metal hard now. The hiss at her teeth had moved fractionally. She didn't translate it into a story. She put it into the ledger as a probable cost and moved on. She did not cough.

They came level with the underside of the opening. It was a black lip, oval, unglazed. Edges were rough in small. There were fines drifting across it that had no business being where people breathed. But that's what winter made of exits sometimes. Black. Not clean. Honest.

Elise checked only the things that could change the next move. Roof above: steady load, no tilt. Band: clear line, brighter than five beats prior. Marta: forward, palms near the ice, cone set. Kiran: harness under her hand, leash tight, breath matched to her count, pupils normal under his lamp slit. Gas: hardest to justify, but she did it anyway. E 27. She felt it like a number and like nothing else. K 24, by the glance she made as she lifted his wrist. She didn't show it back to him.

She set the count with a press to his scapula that told him they would move the moment the roof lifted the fraction she needed to clear her mask into the dark. She saw Marta's hand lift by the same degree she would need. Everything in the world was this one lip.

They committed to breach.

She tightened her grip and made the next exhale long and precise and did not look back, mask frame kept neutral to the lip.

Chapter 11

The Polynya Window

Half-beat held. Lip ahead.

The lift came. Elise let the roof have its millimetre, matched the half-beat they'd been holding, and moved through the lip with her mask frame neutral to the ice. The black edge slid past her lenses and then there was air.

It burned inside her nose. Not a figure of speech. Actual sting. Iodine and cold iron. The turquoise of the polynya lay thin and flat under a low ceiling of cloud. The opening was no wider than two bodies at the near end and widened to a blunt oval away from them. The ice rim stood at different heights; the sheet looked twisted then released. Bubbles raked along the underside and blew out into the air in small seams.

Her regulator hiss was the same sound inside her head it had been under the roof. She kept it in her mouth long enough to count one eight. Marta surfaced at her left shoulder, one hand under the ice, the other flat on the surface to stop a rise into the rough. Kiran rose on her right, held by the short leash and her hand on his harness webbing. He came up clean and then his body locked.

It started in his forearms. They stiffened; the coil against his chest jumped once. His teeth clamped. Eyes wide then not seeing. The convulsion ran across him and stopped in under a count. His throat worked once and then stilled. His legs were weight for her to carry again.

Elise took one split breath through the regulator and pressed her thumb deeper into the webbing at his shoulder to keep the leash from taking a hard angle. She drew him in until his shoulder touched hers. The

air was so cold sound thinned in the cold. Somewhere above them the ice gave a long, low sound that didn't change level. Water ran along the rim in thin films and dripped back.

Marta didn't waste words. She jerked her chin at a floe edge two body lengths to port where the ice looked a shade thicker. She put her palm flat and slid, elbows close, making water do as little lifting as possible. "Now," she said. Single syllable, anywhere English. She held her knife hand tucked and out of the way.

Elise moved. The leash made the distance a fixed thing; Kiran's legs didn't help. She made her exhale long enough not to cough and kept her mouthpiece seated. Cheek to air gave nothing except cold and the feel of wind on wet neoprene. Her body remembered the eight even if the count had new numbers on it now. Her ribs complained on the right with every reach.

They hit the floe. She kept her ribcage off the rim to limit conductive loss. The rim was rough and granular, a lip that would abrade a suit if you let it. Marta took the first hold. She put her forearm over the edge and dropped her body weight backwards without trying to muscle anything, then pivoted so the rim didn't cut the sleeve. She got her other arm through Kiran's harness and used the webbing to turn him in one clean half-circle. His face came up; water ran from his hood. His regulator was still in. He didn't breathe.

Elise felt the cough before she could stop it. A pressure that started low and rose sharp. She tucked her chin and tried to bleed air in a nose sniff that wouldn't throw her mask. The regulator had a taste she knew too well. If she coughed hard, the mask would ride and she would find the edge with the frame. She tried to hold the shape of an exhale against the impulse and failed. It hit, bright inside her chest. Pain spiked under the right rib line and shot up to her collarbone. She coughed into the mouthpiece anyway and the taste changed metallic. When she got breath again, she tasted blood around the silicone.

Marta got Kiran's shoulders onto the ice and went for Elise's forearm with her free hand. No drama. Grip, pull, leverage against the edge. Elise helped enough to make the angle work and no more. The leash snagged on something and then came free with a small pop. They came onto the ice in a stuttering move timed to a surface slosh as the opening surged and eased. The floe gave a tight, pressed sound.

Radial cracks opened from their forearms where they pressed. A set ran whiter than the rest. Marta's hand flattened, stay. She shifted her hips two fingers left and the crack line paused. They spread their weight; the ice held.

Elise tried for words. A check-in. Anything that would make a plan into the air. What came out was a wet sound and a thread of red that streaked the inside of her mask where it touched the frame. She folded the mask off her face one-handed, keeping Kiran's harness trapped under her other. The air cut her eyes and didn't matter. She spat blood onto the ice away from his face and brought her mouth back to air.

Kiran didn't breathe. There were no rolled whites. They stayed dull and wrong. His chest didn't move. The ledger put a blank line in front of her. Give it a number. Don't let the pencil slip.

Marta's voice was low. "Airway." Nothing else.

Elise nodded because her throat wouldn't allow sound. She kept the harness in one hand and let the leash slack fall where it wanted. The double-ender was still on her D-ring. The cord spanned to his. It could wait. Duty changed shape but not content.

She slid her glove to his mask; the strap was twisted under his hood at the ear. She found the buckle and pulled, then took the mouthpiece with a twist that didn't hurt his lips. Water ran out of the corner of his mouth and onto the floe, where it froze in a thin film that seemed trivial and would be something if they had to move again. She got her fingers to the hinges of his jaw and drove it forward, a clean jaw thrust. His mouth opened a finger. The tongue sat as an obstacle and moved when she

pushed it clear with a glove tip. She lifted his chin to the point where airway becomes straight rather than closed. It was a position her body knew because it had done it in training on warm floors and aluminium trolleys. Here it was ice and the sound of water running.

Her chest hurt enough to change her breath. Marta's hand was on her shoulder and then gone, then back. Thump. Not a slap. Enough to tell her body to stay in the world. Elise rolled Kiran a finger to his side and back, to let the last of the water drain. He stayed slack.

Her own mouthpiece already out, she put her mouth over his. Not a habit. An action. Small, just enough to lift his chest. She gave one small breath that was hardly a breath at all. The pain tried to force her body to make a noise. She took it and made it do work instead. The breath went in. His chest rose barely. She took her mouth away and watched. Nothing. Another breath. A brighter pain tore under her ribs. This time something shifted in his throat. He gagged, small and ugly. He took air on his own. Not enough to satisfy anyone, but it was movement. Airway clear. Breathing shallow. Insulate. She slid his hood seam to cut wind wash along his cheek. Marta swept his harness for snags and flattened the left shoulder strap, tucking the loose tail. He coughed weakly and the sound made the skin at the back of her neck lift. She checked his mouth again for anything that didn't belong. It was just water and a string of mucus that had no place in the world and yet was here.

Marta rolled him onto his side cleanly, a recovery position that kept his airway open and let the next bit of water come out without re-inhaling it. She braced his head on Elise's thigh so it wouldn't go backwards. Then Marta tore her eyes from Kiran and put them on Elise. She put a glove flat between Elise's shoulder blades and pushed once, twice, in a rhythm that didn't hurt and didn't try to do more than keep a human in a cold wind awake. "Stay," she said. She didn't say it twice. She angled herself to take the wind across Elise and Kiran.

Elise wanted to tell her about the red on the ice. Her mouth didn't have a space for it. Her breath had new numbers. The pain was a point on

the right that was there on the inhale and there on the exhale, different shapes of wrong. She wasn't going to make it disappear by noticing it too much. She noticed it enough to not make it worse.

Kiran took another breath. It had a thin, sucking sound at end-range. He coughed, once, and then three useless swallows happened and then something stuck. The next breath was a little easier. Elise kept her hand on his harness because the hand didn't know another job. The harness was just webbing, but in that minute it anchored his chest to the ice.

A long creak ran under the ice. The opening near their knees widened by enough to see. The edge under Marta's elbow lifted, then settled. The water in the opening made a sloshing pattern that had not been there a minute before. Bubbles from under-ice seams ran out in different places. The roof was unloading something into this hole.

Marta's eyes tracked the change. Her hands stayed where they needed to be: one at Kiran's shoulder to keep his chest open and his face turned, one ready at the rim to push away if the ice did something that would break bones. She didn't invent trouble. She watched for load changes and put herself where it could not crush them accidentally.

Elise's vision narrowed. Not theatrics. Black around the edges, then a tunnel that moved when she moved her eyes. She rode it down to a smaller place and kept her hand. She kept counting without thinking. One to eight, then the half-beat. The numbers gave her the shape of breath even when pain took the content.

The wind came from up-fjord. It brought a smell of snow that hadn't fallen yet. It hit her wet hood and went through. She pressed closer to cut the wash. The cloud didn't move fast; it just pressed down. She saw Marta's jaw and the way it set. No argument left in it, the kind of set that says the only thing to do with the next minute is use it in the only way it can be used.

"Hold him," Marta said. Not because she thought Elise would let go, but because it was a thing to put in the air. Elise answered by moving her

fingers into the webbing more. Her left glove had fully given up on warm. The seam leak that had started below the thumb pad had won. The fingers were tools with poor feedback that still worked if you told them what to do and then didn't ask them how they felt about it.

She spat again onto the ice away from his face. Red on white. No time to subtract it from anything except her own future lungs.

Kiran took another breath. It had a soft hitch at the top. Marta adjusted his jaw a fraction and the hitch faded. His eyelids twitched. He didn't wake properly. He didn't need to yet. He needed to keep air and heat.

Marta used bodies to make insulation where there was none. She slid one thigh under Kiran's shoulder so bone wasn't on ice. She kept his cheek out of contact with the floe and let the hood do the job it was meant to do. She took Elise's forearm and laid it across Kiran's back, then shifted it so that the weight stopped the tremor that had started in his shoulders. Elise didn't know when the tremor had started. It was gone with the pressure on him.

The opening widened again. Not much, not a human's worth. Enough to change the shape of sound. The water started to pull along the edge where it had been pushing. Elise heard it on the right side of her head first, then her left. Kiran's breath made a small fog in the cold that blew sideways and disappeared. Elise's didn't fog the same way. There was too much heat going somewhere else inside her before it got to air.

Gulls lifted from somewhere she couldn't see and came to the new line. Not close. Just a pattern change that she could read even with her vision constricted. They made the sound that gulls make and then shut up when wind hit them.

A head broke the water at the far edge of the widening. Seal, small and pale around the eyes. It took air in two sharp pulls and then rolled back under. It came up again nearer the line that hadn't been open before and blew water in a snort. Another head showed and went, not a pair, a

proximity.

Marta watched them and didn't move. The seals were reading the open water. Their turns marked the new seam of flow.

The slosh against the ice changed, clear. "Stay," Marta said again when the floe sounded unstable. She divided her weight into two good places and one poor place that wouldn't suddenly crack under the three of them. Marta slid the stage a hand's breadth to avoid a lever under the chest. The boltsnap clicked against aluminium. The tiny sound made Elise look and then let her eyes close for one count. Not more.

Kiran breathed again and then again. Shallow but rhythmic now. His right hand twitched on a beat that was not hers. She didn't try to make it fit. She made sure it didn't catch anything that would lift and break skin.

The low sound in the ice changed. It lengthened and lost its rise. A tear ran, long and low, somewhere away from them and then towards them and then past. The opening widened by metres in the direction of the tear. The rim near their knees fell away by a finger's height as the load redistributed. Water poured from under a roof seam and hit the opening in a single mass. It ran out in strakes and hit the opposite side and rebounded. Elise could feel it through the floe and through her elbow.

Marta moved them without making it look like movement. She pressed Elise's sleeve up Kiran's back to get the meat of her forearm onto him and off the ice. She shifted her knee a palm's width and the sound of the floe changed. It went from a hard slate sound to a softer one. The crack line in front of her stopped migrating.

Elise's chest hurt when she breathed, a small catch under the back-right ribs on each inhale. That was its own thing and not a choice now. She held onto Kiran's harness because she could and because it helped. She watched his hood move with his breath and counted not to count it but to feel the shape of the seconds. He coughed and forced a broken swear through closed teeth; his jaw jumped. The rough consonant landed clear; his airway was working.

Marta's hands were on different jobs: rim, jaw, gear that could become a catch or a lever. She looked up at the line of cloud and then to the long edge of the polynya, where smaller pieces of ice started to spin and catch on each other. She put her palm up once, wait. They waited; the sheet held a steady tone.

Elise didn't fall. She had places to go within her head that had nothing to do with mercy. She stayed because Marta's hand on her back said stay and because her fingers said they were still hands even though they had no feeling left that mattered.

Kiran's breath found a new size. Bigger than the last. He swallowed once and rolled his eyes under the lids. He didn't come up yet. She didn't need him to. She needed his chest to keep moving and his face to stay where it wouldn't breathe ice.

The opening had changed shape enough that the far side was further away. A small pulse under the ice became visible at the surface as a run of darker water that poured into the new space and mixed with the light. The water near their elbows lifted and settled with a period that wasn't the one they had in their lungs. It began to match a larger period. A new flow line established through the opening and ran steady.

Elise let the numbers go for a count because they were no longer about control. Her mouth tasted of iron and neoprene. The wind put a small tremor into the wet hair at the back of her head under the hood. Her chest made a noise when she breathed that she hoped was not going to become a different kind of noise. If it did, she would live with the name for it later.

Marta breathed louder on purpose. She made her breath show because it made Elise's breath want to copy it. She never said that out loud, not once. She just did it. She rolled Kiran another millimetre so that his mouth would drain without clouding his next inhale and put her hand back at the rim. Her gauntlet creaked where the leather ran across the rough ice. Her lamp, which had been a ghost since below, gave a brief

indifferent pulse and died without ceremony. Elise's light died too without fanfare a minute later. Kiran's slit had already gone to black. It didn't matter. The opening held enough light. Seals shifted surfacing to the new edge; gulls reset to the new line.

Elise moved her legs enough to stop a cramp. The movement made a sound in her chest that was not a cough and not a breath and not something to honour with a name. She watched Marta's knuckles go white inside neoprene at the rim and then relax to normal again. Marta looked at her then. A look that said exactly one thing: yes, we are here. It didn't ask for anything.

They shifted their bodies a little to make the floe ride rather than break. Steering without hands. Subtracting the wrong kind of weight. Putting elbows where they didn't excite the wrong sound. The floe shifted under their distributed weight.

The fjord's flow changed. That was a fact, not a theory. The opening widened again under a long, distant tear, and water came out through the gap with a new tone and then settled into a stable pattern. The three of them stayed on the floe edge, alive and marked, doing the one thing that made sense: not moving until conditions allowed and then moving exactly as much as that allowed.

Chapter 12

Ledger Open

The ice drew heat from their forearms and ribs. Marta made small, exact changes and watched the responses: Kiran's shoulder half a hand higher on her thigh to take cheek off ice; Elise's elbow a palm's width to stop a crack line migrating under the joint; the stage cylinder slid across the floe until its dull aluminium lay as a low wall against the wind; the boltsnap set so it would not lever under a rib. She arranged bodies and gear until movement settled and less went wrong.

Elise kept a hand on Kiran's harness and counted. Eight in, seven out with the half-beat hold when pain hit the right side low and lit her collarbone. She made the out-breath smooth and small because big made a cough and cough made the taste in her mouth metallic again. The leash slack lay against her wrist. It had done the right work, and the clip on her D-ring pressed cold through fabric.

The opening widened by another small increment. Water ran out in a different pattern, longer now. The seals surfaced not where they had at the start but along the new line, heads breaking with two quick pulls, eyes black and wet. They surfaced along the new line by habit. Kiran watched them from the corner where his hood edge didn't block sight. He didn't move his head much. He didn't need to. The heads told him where the water went.

Marta looked once toward the far edge. A skiff cut slowly parallel to the open water, too far for hand signals, a speck that kept the bow low and didn't cut into the ice to get closer. The skiff held off the rim; the pilot was reading the same risk. She kept her focus on the rim.

Kiran's breathing held shallow and regular. The first real voice he produced came out of a tight jaw and slipped along cracked teeth. "Sorry." Barely air. Then, after a gap his body needed more than speech, "Thanks."

Elise moved two fingers under the harness web and pressed once. No more. It was acknowledgement and a boundary, both. Her mouth didn't have spare air for anything extra. Pain under the ribs made a small shape at the end of each inhale. She kept it inside the count.

Marta used her hands for heat. She put the back of one gauntlet at Elise's shoulder blades and pressed once, twice, not hard, the same rhythm that had kept a slipping body attentive a few minutes earlier. "Stay," she said, the word shaped to not carry far. She kept her other hand near the rim. On this ice, extra movement raised risk; only correct load distribution worked.

Another crack went by under their forearms with a dry, crystalline sound and kept going until it faded under thicker ice. The floe flexed and settled with a low note that didn't climb. Forces carried on without regard. Their injuries had no veto.

Elise watched the polynya take on a new geometry. The far rim pulled away by metres when a distant tear ran, then slowed. Bubbles moved differently along the underside. A seam that had been a trickle became a run. They were where flow and ice left them.

Wind from up-fjord carried the hint of coming snow. The smell was clean and thin. It stiffened wet neoprene and pulled more heat they couldn't spare. Marta levered the stage cylinder a hand higher and laid it just upwind of Elise's torso so the wall of metal broke the flow on her front. Not warm, just less cold air crossing her chest. It reflected wind and gave the cold fewer paths.

"Don't move," Elise said. The words came out degraded, pressed down to survive the path through her chest. She lifted a hand, palm flat, fingers quiet. No flapping. No edges. A seal had surfaced nearer than

before. It looked at them because it had eyes and because they were shapes that didn't belong, then slid under. She would not make sound or throw hands into air that might alter anything she didn't intend to change.

Kiran's eyes followed the seal and then stayed on the rim. He swallowed. He kept his tongue clear of his airway and stayed with the rim, not the last ten minutes.

"Cold?" Marta asked him, not for conversation but for inventory. Her voice sat against the wind.

He nodded, then corrected himself, "Y-yeah." The word shook once and steadied. "Arms okay." His hands were under him, balled where he could feel the webbing and the floe with the same skin. He was lying on his better side; the one that had not convulsed until the jaw had locked.

"Jaw?" Marta said.

"Fine," Kiran said. It was not fine. It was functional. Function was enough.

Elise spat blood a second time to the lee side, away from Kiran's face. It hit the ice, red on white, and froze in a shape wind would not carry back. Her breath didn't fog. The heat she produced didn't reach the air the same way. She watched that without interpreting it into a story. It meant she had less exchange surface or a path where air and blood touched had been torn. Names could be found later. The ledger line existed now: capacity reduced.

Marta lifted a finger for Kiran to see, pointed along the far rim, then drew a flat line. Wait. The sign held.

Time was measured differently here. By shivers as they built and stopped. By the period of slosh changing from short to long and then holding steady. By bubbles in thin sheets under the ice cutting faster then slower. By breaths counted against pain. Not by clocks. Instruments were either dead or on the wrong side of a problem they couldn't change

without cost.

“Warm hood seam,” Marta said. She slid the edge of Kiran’s hood a finger to reduce wind along cheek and ear. He made no sound. The change shaved nothing off the cold that mattered and yet took the sting out of one ribbon of air. It was worth the movement.

Elise let herself close her eyes for one count and then opened them. The tunnel at the edge of her vision did not shrink. She kept her weight spread and her palm light on the webbing. She pressed Kiran’s scapula on eight and the movement that came was breath rather than panic.

The opening took on a sustained shape. The far rim no longer marched outward. It held, then admitted a small calving on their side; a thirty-centimetre section slid under, rotated once, and was pulled into the run. Marta shifted her knee, centered a crack, and the sound under her kneecap went from bright to dull. She looked at Elise once. Elise gave the smallest nod the ribs would accept.

They did not move more than the ice forced. They didn’t look for work to spend heat on. Wind and tide set a new pattern across the opening; they read it and kept still.

Marta’s hand went to her suit pocket and came back with a compact VHF the size of a glove palm. Its casing was scratched. Its rubber antenna had white salt scars where it had dried in other winters. She cupped it under her chin to cut wind. When she pressed the power, a small, dim green lit. Battery one segment. Low transmit power. Volume down. Enough to try once.

Elise watched her face, not the device. The double-ender still on her D-ring was there when the floe shifted. Marta looked from the rim to the radio, then to the headland and the skiff that had been parallel to the opening earlier. She pressed transmit and kept it tight. She gave it a

five-second transmit window.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday,” she said, voice level and low. “Three divers on a floe at a new polynya, near the low headland with the broken ridge line. No craft. One injured, breathing. Ice unstable. Standing by.” She didn’t tag a callsign to a vessel they didn’t have. She made the need clear and didn’t fill the air with extra numbers she couldn’t fix later.

The radio hissed and carried the sound of distance. A male voice answered, accent from the coast, paced with measured pauses. “Copy. New opening seen. You at the near end or farther out?”

“Near end,” Marta said. “Rim uneven. Cracks under us, calving small. Can’t move. Battery one segment.”

“Understood,” the voice said. “We can’t come from water-side. Ice is soft near the line. We’re shifting sleds along shore. Headland side is bad. There’s another window near the river bend. Seals moved. Routes are wrong today.” The surprise sat under the words. The usual timing had slipped.

Elise felt the information seat itself. There was a line from their decision to sprint, through the tear in the roof, into this man’s day. Not blame. Causality. The fjord had changed and so had the routes people used to live with it.

Marta cut in at once. “We’ll hold. Drifting slow, about a body length every two minutes, toward thicker bands. Two breathing, one hurt. We can wait. Don’t risk the edge.”

“Good,” the voice said. “Keep still. If the floe catches the thicker plate near the old crack line, we can send two on foot with a line. If not, we wait for the run to settle. You have light?”

“Natural,” Marta said. “Lamps dead. Low cloud.”

“Fine,” the voice said. “We’ll watch your line. I’ll key again if we’re moving. Stay off the rim.” The radio clicked. Then came back. “You did right not to try for us. The edge is taking pieces. This season just

changed.” The click ended the call.

Marta didn’t transmit thanks. She set volume low. The indicator flickered, then held at one segment. She powered the set off and slipped it back into her suit pocket where it would stay warm enough to survive another try later.

The creak lost its wobble and held steady.

Kiran had listened and watched. His eyes had done the work of looking and putting facts in order. They had also done the work of deciding not to speak yet. After a count, and another, he said, “We, ,” then stopped it before sounds took heat. He swallowed and tried again. “I got helped and they just lost a day. Maybe more.” His jaw unclenched a fraction. He set his eyes on the rim and took one slow breath.

Elise’s breath caught on a small wrong in her ribs. She kept her hand on his harness and didn’t waste the air to contradict or soothe. She pressed once, a firm contact through webbing that said what she needed to say: yes, this is real; yes, it will be carried; carry it without noise.

Wind lifted again briefly, then settled. The slosh at the rim lengthened and held. The seals surfaced farther toward the distant side and then reoriented again. The gulls had learned the new line and made their own small corrections.

“Twenty minutes,” Marta said, without a clock. She was reading the distance along the shore by how long it took for a skiff’s white hull to cross an interval between two broken flags on the ice. “Maybe more. We wait. Save the radio for when they say go.”

Kiran nodded once. He rolled his eyes under closed lids to rest the muscles that held them open. His breath shortened and then stretched again. He swallowed the cold and kept it inside his mouth where it didn’t make a sound.

Elise closed her eyes for one long slosh and opened them. She matched her exhale to the long slosh; training held.

The light thinned to flat blue; no hard shadows; surface contrast reduced.

Elise checked the space her lungs would allow. She took an in-breath to the place where the catch made a small spike and didn't push beyond it. She let out enough of an exhale to be a breath instead of a cough and held the half-beat. Fog didn't take shape in front of her mouth. It wasn't about ambient temperature. It was about the path inside. She accepted that. Keep valves from scraping. These were new limits in her body.

Marta took a flat, silver packet from a thigh pocket that had stayed dry all the way in. She pulled the corner with her teeth and unfolded the foil to the size it needed to be. It crackled loud in the stillness until she held it down. She lifted Elise enough that the movement cost the smallest cost, short breath and a close-pressed jaw, and slid the foil around torso and ribs under the cylinders where she could. She tucked edges under straps and let the rest lie flat in the wind shadow of the stage. Her hands were gentler than her voice had been below. Both forms worked. Each had their place.

"I'll take first watch, there," Kiran said, nodding toward the hairline arc near the rim.

"Monitor there," Marta said to Kiran, pointing at a place where a hairline in the ice made a half-circle and stopped at a blunt ridge. "If it migrates, speak. Not loud."

He nodded. "I've got it." He said it with a steadier jaw than before. He watched the line with eyes that had been scared and now were fixed on a job.

A floe edge on their right let go. A clean section sliced off and slid under the lip in a single motion. It made a sound that felt under elbows and ribs more than in ears. The rest of their rim held. The tone under the floe shifted from bright to stable. The geometry settled; the rim stabilised

as load redistributed.

Elise glanced at Marta. Marta had already moved her knee and hand to the new better places. She kept her palm at the rim, felt it once, made a small adjustment, and then looked back at Elise. The look had no spare symbols in it. It asked one question and answered it at the same time. We are still here.

“Watch,” Kiran said after a moment, voice low. “The half-circle moved a millimetre toward the rim. It stopped.” He placed a finger near the line without touching it. His glove didn’t show the millimetre. His eyes did. He didn’t try to quantify it beyond true.

“Good,” Marta said. “Hold.”

Elise’s right hand had blunt feedback under two layers. The left had the leak from earlier. It was numb, not responsive. She put weight where it would not crush or slip. She ran the ledger again, out of habit and because habit kept people alive when they could not invent. Three divers, three breathing; one with cost. Lamps dead. VHF one segment, off. Polynyas: one present, at least one more near a river bend. Seals reading the new line. Community moving sleds. Ice: unstable but stabilising. Wind: offshore, low, with snow coming later. Time: not a number, a cold progression.

Kiran’s head lowered and raised in small increments as his breath found new sizes. He looked at Elise once. It was not to ask if she was okay. It was to say he was still in the world and ready to spend what he had on the right thing. She didn’t speak. She slid her glove over the back of his hand and squeezed once. No lecture about count or spacing or clips. You were in the middle, and you stayed because we kept you there. Now you take your place in the ring that holds.

Marta lifted her head, checked the horizon seam where thicker ice lay as low ridges, and then brought her focus back to the small circle of work. She retucked a foil edge near Elise’s ribs, verified Kiran’s crack line with a single gloved tap, and set her palm back between Elise’s shoulders to

steady the breathing. She stayed inside the circle because that is where people continued to be alive.

From the shore side came a low, distant change in sound that might have been a sled runner on old snow or might have been wind moving a loose tin against wood. It didn't repeat. It didn't become a signal. Marta didn't lift the radio. They would hear when it was right to hear.

Elise shifted her weight a finger's worth and the pain in her ribs stayed as it had been: contained if she kept the breath small and even. She took the blue light into her eyes and let it sit there. People had called it beautiful in other winters. She didn't argue. It was also cold and exact and without sentiment. That made it useful.

They lay still. Three bodies in a line at the rim of a changed map. Seals lifted and dropped at the new edge. Gulls rode a path they hadn't ridden yesterday. Under the ice the channels had been re-routed by mass and period. No reversal in the physics. Only consequence. Elise held Kiran's harness and matched her breath to a slosh that didn't belong to her. She made a space for the ledger to stay open. She did not close it with words or promises or anything that would pretend the numbers could be made to go away.

The floe drifted a body length toward thicker ice and then stopped without touching it. The VHF stayed off. Wind eddied around the cylinder wall and lifted a strand of hair under Elise's hood. She watched the line Kiran watched and saw it not move. Her breath caught and then carried. Slosh period at twelve seconds and holding. They did the one thing that could not go wrong: nothing more than the smallest necessary movement, held for as long as the ice allowed.