

❧ *All I Can Truly Deliver* ❧

*If it live in your memory, start with this line.*

—Hamlet's advice to the players

Not until now, two hours after we lost an engine and our instruments, have Mary and I had a room to ourselves. Even for a submarine, the sleeping quarters are tiny. Three steel-framed bunks are lined up head-to-foot with mattresses that smell like old fruit. She sits behind me, her legs around my waist, her forehead on the nape of my neck.

As scared as the others are, they still laughed when the old man suggested Mary and I find a place to talk.

"Say it slow," said Tak. It was the first we had heard of his real voice in some time. His earlier words had been burdened with the weight of prognosis, how much air, what was broken, how much longer. But he made the joke, even managed to crack himself up, snot catching in his throat. "I may have some words for one of you later," he said. "Any of you."

Mary and I, fully clothed, haven't spoken. I am listening to her watch click in the bulkhead's pinched echo. I can't hear her breathing, can't feel it through the fabric of my shirt, but the weight of her head is real enough.

During a grassy summer before we were married, we made the

same promise every couple makes. No one gets left alone. I was never sure if we meant it but we struck the deal and she rubbed my cheeks yellow with flowers. We left our underwear hanging from an oak tree. If we were lucky enough to die together, ours would be a frantic, kissing death. So much crying our hair was wet.

No one has cried down here.

This far from sunshine and newsstands, it is impossible to play by normal emotional rules. Sometime after Tak said we were in trouble, I stubbed a toe, maybe even broke it, but I didn't cuss. The ache is a throb now, spreading up my leg but I think it would hurt more in London.

I've got fear, but even that is vague, like bags under my eyes, a symptom more than a feeling. If the others are more lucid they are no more vocal. Even Mary is quiet and she's never been a mess over anything. She is barely able to keep her head a steady pressure against my neck.

Air goes bad just as fast in silence.

I am guessing.

I am not a scientist. I only came along to film the last expedition of our famous old man. Because both of his names are hard to pronounce — two Vs in one, three Gs in the other — no one bothers to say them. He speaks in an accent. Mary said he is Swiss, though it seems that science has become its own nationality. Luckily, he answers to anything. Omar calls him Professor. Tak gets away with Pops.

When we first met, days ago at a Mexican restaurant in Nova Scotia, his handshake was easy and anonymous.

Withdrawn.

"I'm the old man," he said. I believed him. I could hear his tongue stick in his mouth as he talked. His chin was abnormally sharp, his head unfortunately egg-shaped. All of his hair was gone,

save too-dark eyebrows. He seemed out of place, lingering too long, as if his body were a raincoat he had been wearing several months after a storm.

When conversation came around to the sea, he was new again. His eyes changed shape and he spoke recklessly, more gambler than scientist. Mary told me he only gets that way for the ocean or a book. And the Beatles, she said. She said he sometimes jokes about the similarities between his work and theirs. All the screaming girls.

I am the only member of the crew who has not worked with him before. As we ate our burritos, it only took a few hours to forget I hadn't. When he spoke of his life — sperm whales off the coast of Antarctica or an oil spill in the South Pacific — he let me believe I had been with them; he was simply remembering it for both of us.

That's what he does, Mary said. Give him a chemist, a hydraulics engineer, and a guy who likes to drink wine and he turns them into a research team.

In her metaphor, I was the wine guy though I'm not the only one of us who studied something other than science in college. Mary picked up a minor in dance. Tak has a degree in lit. Even the old man plays several instruments and writes poetry in the margins of his expedition logs. But it's not the same with the rest of them. Hobbies.

My only job, with my cameras and sound equipment, was to record. Before the trouble started, the task was important enough. Only Omar was difficult. Mary warned me. He's rough with beginnings, she said. A sweet guy, but pragmatic, the kind who won't piss until he's got a better reason to get up. He scowled as I loaded the trunks of lighting equipment into the sub. Mary said she didn't know if he even talked to his wife. Maybe to check the temperature of the oven, she said, but nothing without data.

The others were glad to have me. Tak told me to make him look crafty. The old man said to film whatever I wanted. I was getting good footage, the old man chewing his nails, Mary being amazing over charts and graphs.

Now I have nothing to offer anyone.

These minutes are the hardest when reduced to basics: what we have done, or not done, how much I still don't know about her, the stupidity of a single, leaky hose. Statistics about oxygen. How Mary lied to a friend of hers so I could get the BBC job. How she later got me a gig filming her crew. How she turned down a fellowship in San Diego for this. All of the Saturday crap we would be watching on television if we were Somewhere Else.

More than anything, I want her to talk. I want her to describe a dog she saw in the supermarket or tell stories about her sister's children. I try to work out a sentence only to realize that I am once again going over the facts.

Before our departure, there were rumors that the old man was terminal, a couple of polyps the size of acorns removed from his stomach, cancer in his endocrine system, the same that killed his wife. When we boarded, Mary helped him fit several personal oxygen tanks into a storage locker. Tak told stories about the hospital. Even Omar offered things we didn't know.

But, for the first ninety minutes of odd lurches and emergency power, no one said anything that wasn't related to the sub. Before Mary and I were given permission to leave, the last half-hour was all small talk—like the five of us were strangers in a deli.

I decide to move. I squeeze Mary's foot. The massage starts as tender pressure, but after working her calves, it changes. I tickle at her ankles and wiggle her kneecaps with my thumbs. Without lifting her head, she begins to tickle back. "Monkey's got the giggles," she says. She starts with the fat on my sides and moves to my armpits. We aren't laughing but it feels better.

We're still at it when Tak speaks from the other side of the bulkhead. "Tell me I'm interrupting something," he says.

"Close your eyes," Mary says, "and come in."

"I'm gonna cheat."

"And we're going to disappoint," she says. "Something?"

"Maybe." He shrugs, licks his teeth. "The old man says we're gonna do *Hamlet*."

"As in *Hamlet*?"

"No. The other one."

"Great," Mary says. "Death and acting on the same day."

"Except for Champ," Tak says. "Pops wants to film it."

"Seems silly," I say. But I am already excited. It will be easier to dwell on loving Mary without facing her.

"Do we have a script?"

"No," Tak says. He cleans his glasses, rubbing the lenses. His shirt, covered in grease, can't be helping. The shirt says *I Know More About Submarines Than You Do*. "Pops says we don't need a script. We'll know it when we need to. Something like that."

"Make it up."

"Tomato. Big, red round thing."

When we stand, Mary puts her arm around me, our hips pressed together, her right foot on my left.

"You take one leg, I'll get the other," she says.

Tak does a fatigued little mambo as he leads us to the control room. He is Korean. He wears homemade T-shirts. His hair is longer than a musician's. Though he doesn't mention it, his degrees are ivy league. Mary said he could have had a spot on any research crew. She also said, based on a letter she saw, that she thinks he's an ordained minister. If he is, he keeps it quiet. I've been meaning to bring it up, but he was busy and now doesn't seem right.

He sings us down the corridor. Marvin Gaye. His voice is thin but in tune.

We enter. The old man is using one of my spotlights to make a shadow play against reinforced glass. Behind his birds and rabbits is the blank canvas of the ocean.

“Champ came here to make a movie.”

He doesn't mention death or meaning or our last few hours. The silence is a dare. At first, no one takes it. Omar cracks his thumbs by squeezing them inside his fists. Tak clicks a nail against his teeth while he hums.

Mary is less kinetic. She drapes my arm over her like a shawl. I remember yard work the morning before we flew to Nova Scotia. I pulled weeds, and she was ready to cut the grass so Ginny with the paper route would only have to do it twice while we were gone. The mower wouldn't start. Mary pumped the manual fuel injector, checked the gas and oil, and changed the spark plug. She got me to lie down and fiddle the choke with my thumb. After several minutes, the mower still didn't work. Nothing could be done, but we continued to worry about it for another hour. We made phone calls and searched the Internet. I found a crazy person that claimed our problems could be solved by mixing decaffeinated coffee with the gasoline. Mary thought about it, holding her mouth like she's holding it now. She asked me to brew a full pot so we could have some with sugar while we finished breaking the machine.

I am in love with her willingness to follow suspicious advice.

We wait and look at each other while our instruments make useless noises and Tak clicks his teeth and the old man breathes audibly until Omar is no longer able to keep his mouth shut.

“We should be fixing shit.”

“No dice.” Tak says.

“Then we should do what we came to do.”

“Impossible,” Tak says.

“If we're already dead,” I offer, “we might as well do this.”

"If," says Omar.

"We could do porn," Tak says.

"Look," Omar says. "We still have if."

"Not our if," Mary says.

She waits for someone to argue with her. She waits too long. I can see her grow uneasy with her own implications.

"My vote," Tak says, "we hang onto the if and shoot the movie."

He talks too fast, every bit as desperate as the way Omar bends and jerks his fingers long after the knuckles have finished popping.

"Look at it this way," Tak says, "we survive and we keep the tape, show our family like a pie-eating contest from summer camp. Or maybe we use it as an audition tape and next year the five of us stroll down the red carpet at the Oscars. But I don't dig on Hamlet. Pouty bastard. Luke Skywalker without droids. We should do *Canterbury Tales*," he says. "Or Shaft."

Mary laughs and Tak stops.

"This is not why we're here," Omar says.

"We can," I say. I have the floor. I am the man who works with film. I should have words about legacy and purpose and immortality. "This can make sense," I say.

I can't tell if anyone believes me.

"This," Omar says, "if nothing else. Listen to me. If nothing else."

He is taller than the rest of us.

"It, if nothing else, is bad science," he says. "And a bad idea."

Mary, Tak, and I try to find a better argument. After a claustrophobic minute, we turn to the old man.

"A strange thing happened to everyone I studied with," he says. "When they knew enough, they all went mad as artists. Gets to a point, you talk like a painter. Most experiments, they look like sonnets, a turn after the second quatrain."

He pauses and I study him. I wish the cameras were rolling. He doesn't have the energy I saw in Nova Scotia. His skin is sallow and he breathes with too much effort, like his whole body is yawning. But he is more impressive than I have seen him, with more gravity than I imagine him having, even as the younger man in his and Mary's stories.

"There is little difference," he says, "between us and a group of actors. Vocabulary. Mere syntax."

He swallows.

"Schumpert, the great man. No one studies him now. A great man. A sense for whales. Kinship. Could read them like the hairs on his arms. Do what you will, he told me, but leave notes like you're listening to Jesus."

No one speaks to his riddle.

"But *Hamlet*?" Tak says. "Really white, that Shakespeare."

"We could write something else," I say.

"Something new," Mary says.

"Everyone does *Hamlet*," Tak says.

"Are these oceans new oceans?" the old man asks.

"Not why we're here," Omar says.

"Bad science," the old man says, "is leaving more mysteries than we started with."

"*Hamlet*?" Tak says.

"Ours is a tragedy."

He is so gentle when he says it.