No One Did This

A novel of the Hungry Gods Universe

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Contents

Part One · *The saved city* 3

1 Six Languages 4
2 The other landing 13
3 Seventy hours 20
4 The opening command 28
5 Clear 36
6 Under Q6 45

Part Two · *The missing whole* 54

7 The people the roster lost 55
8 Annelies's hour 65
9 The good crossing 74
10 The attachment 84
11 Dinner without a statement 93
12 The whole act 101

Part Three · *What an answer costs* 111

13 Names on the repairs 112
14 The patch 121
15 No one did this 129
16 What Femke keeps 137
17 The closed harbour 147
18 The restricted plan 155

Part Four · *The people beside the water* 164

19 Preparation 165
20 The first stop 176
21 The gallery 187
22 The return 198
23 Nothing 207
24 What remains owed 216
25 Two stops 230

Part One

The saved city

1

Six Languages

By the time Rima saw her brother's name, the harbour had thanked itself in six languages.

The wall of the dispatch room ran through them while she stood on the mat inside the door with rain still coming off her sleeves. Dutch first, then English, then four she took in as shapes before she read them, each version the same sentence under the harbour's blue knot: *Meren Harbour thanks the 12,114 people who crossed with us.* Below the words the evacuation played on a loop, a green replay of the channel with small lights sliding in ahead of the barrier and the barrier closing behind the last of them like a hand laid flat on a table. Someone had made the lights slightly different sizes, one for each vessel. It was well done.

Then the other screen. It was the size of a tray, bolted at hip height beside the door where dispatch kept shift swaps and lost property, and somebody had turned its bracket to face the room. *Workers lost at the Spur. Next of kin are being contacted.* Nine lines. Seven of them carried a small grey mark in the margin. Rima read the marks before she read the names, because marks were the part she could do arithmetic on, and the arithmetic said seven and two.

The fourth line was *Sayegh, Dani*, and it had no mark.

She read it again, as she would have read a work order that had the wrong lock number on it. Family name first, the way rosters had it. The spelling was right, which was more than most clerks managed on a good day. *Lost* was a word that might mean several things. It did not

necessarily mean what the grey marks meant. A person could be lost the way a part was lost, in a drawer, in the wrong bay, signed out to somebody else.

She had been telling herself this since the lock office. It held up better in the lock office.

"You're standing in the wet," said a voice from the console. "There's a mat for that, and you're on it, so I don't know why I said it."

The dispatcher was a woman in her fifties sitting straight at the long desk with her left arm strapped across her chest in a blue sling. She had the grey tidy look of someone who had washed her face in a basin and not slept since. When she spoke, Rima saw the gap where one front tooth had been. The tongue went to it twice in a sentence and then stopped, as if reminded.

"Rima Sayegh," the woman said. "Lock engineer. Sayegh, Rima. No, that's the roster order, I keep doing the roster order, it's the third day of it. You're Dani's."

"Yes."

"Nessa. Visser." She lifted the good hand an inch off the desk, which was all of a handshake she could manage at that distance. "He said you were coming Thursday. To see the launch again. He said you'd walk round it twice and say it was a coffin with a motor in it, and then you'd lend him the money anyway."

"I'd already lent him the money."

"Then he'd have been wrong about which part of it you'd do second." Nessa's mouth tried something and gave up. "Sit. No. Not that one."

The chair Rima had been reaching for was the nearest, a grey dispatch chair on a five-star base, and its seat was split from the front edge nearly to the back along the grain of the moulding. Somebody had folded a hi-vis jacket over the crack. Rima knew the chair. In the spring she had filed a replacement request for it herself, against the advice of a facilities clerk who explained, kindly, that dispatch chairs were not lock business. The request number had been long. She re-

membered the number. She had not once, since spring, thought to ask whether anything had come of it.

"That's the one you wrote up," Nessa said, watching her look. "It's been patient. Take the other. The stool's fine, the stool's Gijs's, he won't mind, Gijs is on the Westgate side doing the boats that aren't ours."

Rima took the stool. It was still warm. The room smelled of coffee and wet wool and, under that, the faint cold-iron smell of a building with water standing somewhere beneath it. Through the window, over the top of Nessa's head, she could see the barrier's control house at the mouth of the channel, and she could hear, a long way off through the glass, the winch on the east leaf running a bearing that was flat by perhaps a semitone. She noted it and did not know yet that she had.

"I want to know where he is," she said.

Nessa looked at the small screen by the door, and then at her.

"I know what that says," Rima said. "I want to know where he is."

"The list says he's under the quay." Nessa put it without cushioning, and Rima found she was grateful. "Seven are up. They came up yesterday and the night before, the families have been told, Adriaan from the registry came in himself for four of them. Two are still down. I can tell you that the list is a good list. I wrote half of it. I can't tell you what's down there, because I haven't been, and I'd be making something up, and you're the kind who'd check."

"Which two?"

"Your brother. And Adina." She turned the cup a quarter-turn on its ring. "Stoica. Electrical. She's been with the contractors eleven years, she had a tester of Pim's she was meant to hand back at the end of the shift, I know that because Pim has rung me four times about it, and I have said four times that I do not have a tester, Pim, I have a lot of paperwork."

Rima let that sit. It did not help.

"Who put him on it?" she said. "Dani. Who confirmed him there."

"The roster put him there. I put him there, if you want it plainly. I had him on the return list for the launch. I had eleven names on that list and I can't get the number to come out, and it's making me— I keep starting it again." She nodded to the sheet on the desk in front of her: a printed page, the boxes ticked in two different pens, the last third of it blank. "I said I'd finish it before anyone made me do anything else. I'll not finish it. I know that. It's the thing to do with the hand, Rima. It wants something to do."

The good hand was around a paper cup. It was a heavy-walled cup from the canteen, the kind that held its heat, and it was shaking. Not much. Enough that the tea was making a thin brown ring on the inside wall and then losing it.

Rima reached over and put two fingers against the base of the cup, and Nessa let her.

"I can't drink with this one," Nessa said, of the strapped arm. "And I can't do it with this one," of the other, "while someone's looking at me. That's all it is."

"I'm not looking."

"You are. I don't mind it."

Rima looked at the wall instead. The lights in the green replay had reached the barrier and were folding in behind it again, same sizes, same order. On the left of the screen, in a margin she hadn't noticed, the same event ran in plan: the main basin as a pale blue field, the channel as a thin vein into it, the outer service basin hatched in grey at the edge of the frame and labelled in small capitals. She was looking at a number in the corner of the screen that said 12,114.

"He was doing the launch for you," Nessa said, more quietly. "I don't mean he did it *for* you. He'd never. I mean he'd been talking about it so long he'd started to say it in your voice."

"What voice?"

"'It'll need a survey.'"

Rima nearly smiled, and was a little ashamed of how near it came. "It will," she said. "It needs a survey."

The terminal on the console chimed.

The chime was the dull two-note one dispatch used for a call coming in on a crew line, the sort that meant a worker with a problem and a phone. Nessa glanced at it, then did not glance away. The label on the screen read SAYEGH D. — *crew plan (continued).* Beneath it, in the small grey type that interfaces used for the things they didn't want you to dwell on: *Personal accounts restricted pending standing review. Routing via employer endpoint.*

"That's his line," Nessa said.

"It can't be."

"It's his line." The good hand tightened round the cup and Rima moved her fingers away, and the tea went up the wall of the cup and came down again. "They said it might. Adriaan said, with the four that have the plan, it might. He said there's a period, it's a day or two, before it— I didn't think. I had the list."

"Pick it up."

"I can't do the headset one-handed, I've been trying since—"

Rima leaned across her and pressed the green key.

There was a breath of room on the line. It was the sound of a small space with a hard floor, a ventilation fan, a chair being shifted. Then:

"Nessa? Is that you? They've put me through the crew line, I can't get into anything, I've tried the bank twice, it says there's a standing review, and I don't know what that is, I haven't stood anywhere."

Rima had not understood, until that moment, that she had been waiting nineteen hours to hear a particular sentence. She had pictured it differently. She had pictured it as her own name. What came instead was her brother, slightly aggrieved at a bank.

"Dani," she said.

"Rima." His voice went up with relief, the rising note it always had when she turned up at something. "Oh, good. You can sort the account, you know how they go on. What are you doing at dispatch? Did you do the launch? Did you get to the launch, I told Nessa you'd walk round it twice—"

"She told me."

"Did you?"

"No. Not yet." Her own voice was doing something level and careful. She heard it do it. "Dani, where are you?"

"In a room." A pause with a fan in it. "It's a small one, there's a table and a— a sort of speaker. They said it's so I can call out. I don't know where it is, honestly, it's got the registry's name on the door, I could hear them say it. It's fine. It's a perfectly fine room. It's got a chair." The edge of a laugh. "It's a boat, Rima, they do tend to be wet. I know what you're going to say."

She had not been going to say anything about a boat. She had been going to say *where were you when the barrier closed.* The sentence was lined up in her mouth with its edges squared.

"What's the last thing you remember?" she said.

There was a silence on the line, short, and it had the quality of someone checking a pocket.

"Why are you asking me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like I'm a form." Not angry. Puzzled, and a half-step off from hurt. "I was at the berth. I'd got the old—look, I've got the launch, I know where the launch is, I could tell you what's wrong with every inch of her. Ask me something I've got."

"What time did you leave the landing?"

"I haven't left the landing." He said it as if she were the one who was behind. "Rima, I haven't—"

He stopped. In the quiet, the fan ran. Rima looked at Nessa, who was watching the terminal with her mouth shut over the gap in her teeth, and then did something she could not justify: she asked the question again, in a different shape, as if he had only misheard.

"When the barrier closed. Where were you?"

"What barrier?" said Dani.

Then, much more slowly, with something at the back of the voice she had never once heard in thirty-eight years of it:

"Where's Femke?"

Nobody in the room said anything. Nessa's good hand opened and closed on the cup. Rima found she had put her own hand flat against the edge of the console, the way she put it on a lock gate before she trusted it to hold.

"She's at the canteen," Rima said. "She's working. She's—" She stopped, and chose the true thing. "She doesn't know you've called yet. I haven't reached her."

"Why haven't you reached her?"

"I've only just—"

"I've got eleven minutes on this line," Dani said. The puzzlement had gone out of his voice and left a plain, practical tone behind it, the voice he used on a fouled engine. "The woman said eleven. She said it's the first call, and I could use it any way I wanted, and I want to use it to talk to Femke, so I'd be grateful if you'd go and find her, Rima. I'd like you to. I'd like you to do that and not ask me anything else."

"Dani—"

"I asked you to."

There was no accusation in it. That was what she would not be able to put down. He had said it as he might have asked her to pass a spanner, and then waited for her to pass it.

"All right," Rima said. "I'll find her."

"Thanks." The edge of the fan again, and a small sound that might have been the chair. "And Rima? Whatever they've done to the account. It's the joint one. It isn't only mine. Tell them that. It's not only mine."

The line held another few seconds. Then the room on the other end closed up with a soft electronic courtesy, the way a door closes when someone has been told to let it, and the terminal put its two grey words on the screen. *Call ended.* Under them, smaller: *Next contact available after standing review.*

Nessa put the cup down. She put it down carefully, with the good hand, in the exact wet ring it had left on the console, and then looked at her palm as though it belonged to a colleague.

"I'll ring the canteen," she said. "I've got the number, I can do it from here. I've—" She stopped and started again. "I'll do it. You don't want to do it from a corridor."

"I'll go."

"Rima."

"He asked me to find her."

"He asked." Nessa turned the sling a little on her shoulder, as if it were the thing that was heavy. "I only want to say, I had him on the return list. If you want to be angry at somebody in the next hour, be angry at me, I'm here. Somebody with a face."

Rima stood. She noticed that her sleeves had stopped dripping and her hands, which she had thought were steady, were holding the edge of the stool.

"I'm not angry yet," she said. "I don't know who with."

"You will," said Nessa. It sounded like an offer of practical help.

She had her coat half over one arm when she looked back at the wall. She hadn't meant to. She had wanted one last look at the list by the door, and the grey marks in its margin, and the fourth line with nothing beside it, and she found instead that the green replay had come round again. The lights slid in. The barrier closed. And the plan view on the left of the screen, the one she had not read, did what it had been doing every forty seconds for two days: the pale field of the main basin, the thin vein of the channel, and then a spill of green running sideways through a gate into the grey hatched shape at the edge of the frame.

The label under the hatching said *Reserve volume*. Rima read it this time. She had walked along that edge more times than she could count, with a torch, with a clipboard, with her brother once, in the summer, eating something out of paper. In the legend at the foot of the screen, one word was set against the grey: *Unoccupied*.

The green kept rising. It filled the shape from the bottom corner, evenly, in the way water fills a thing that has been built to be filled, until it met the top line of the hatching and stopped. The replay held for a moment, perfect and clean. A shape the map called empty, now full.

Then the six languages came back, and thanked her.

2

The other landing

The return landing lay on the east side of the channel, a quarter of an hour on foot from dispatch if you took the low road and twenty minutes if you took the high one. Rima took the low road. It still had a line of wrack along its foot, a brown tideline of reed and bottle caps and one child's sandal, and the council crews had not yet been through with the hoses. She walked in the middle where the cobbles were driest. At every third lamp-post someone had pasted the same notice, *Lower city: water off until further notice, standpipes at the Kade and the Mill Street school*, and under each notice someone else had pasted a smaller one that said where to get bread.

That was the part she would not have predicted about a saved city. It organised itself around bread within a day.

A ferry was coming in at the landing as she reached the top of the ramp, one of the broad grey double-enders that crossed to the high town and back, and it was low in the water with people. They stood the way people stand on a boat they have been on too long, with their weight on the rail and their bags between their feet. A man had a cat in a laundry basket with the lid tied down. Two girls in matching school coats were holding either end of a rolled mattress. Someone near the bow was singing, quietly and badly, one of the harbour songs about the lamp at Kade End, and a woman beside him told him to stop and then, after a few bars, joined in on the chorus.

Rima stood and watched them come up the gangway. She counted without meaning to. She counted about two hundred and she

thought, *twelve thousand of those*, and it was a number she could suddenly see.

The canteen occupied what had been a customs shed, long and low, with a roof of old corrugated iron that made rain sound like applause. It had been the return landing's canteen for as long as there had been a return landing. Late workers came in off the launches at the end of a shift and found it open. By day it did soup for the harbour offices, and by night, which was Femke's part of it, it did whatever the night crews would eat.

Today it was doing everything.

The long tables had been pushed end to end and covered with paper. There were harbour crews in orange, ferry hands in wet navy, a row of orderlies from the high-town hospital with their lanyards turned round to hide their names, and, filling every gap, the people off the boats. The noise was the particular noise of a place where nobody had slept and everybody was being fed. Behind the pass, in a steam that fogged the clock, three people in white were moving pots, and at the centre of them, with a ladle in each hand, stood a woman in a grey apron with her dark hair tied up in a cloth.

Femke saw her at once. Rima saw her see.

She did not stop. She finished the bowl in front of her, which was for a boy of about eight who wanted to know whether there was meat in it. She said, "There's a bone in it, I won't lie to you, but you don't have to eat the bone," and handed it over the pass. Then she said without looking up, "Sit down. I've got forty lunches before that."

"Femke—"

"Forty. I'm not being clever, I counted. Sit."

Rima did not sit. She did the thing she always did, which she had once been told was the least attractive of her virtues, and went round the end of the pass and took the tray of clean bowls from Femke's second, a young man who looked grateful and then alarmed, and began setting them out in the right rack, rims all one way. Nobody told her not to. For eleven minutes, by the clock she could just see

through the fog, she did exactly what was needed in the order it was needed.

The queue thinned at last. The second took the ladles. Femke untied the cloth from her hair and tied it again, and Rima saw that her hands were steady and her eyes were not.

"Not here," Femke said. "Come in the back."

The back was the dry store, a cold room that smelled of onions and cardboard, with a tin table, two upturned crates, and a shelf of mugs along the wall. Femke sat on a crate. She sat as if she had been told to sit, the way people did when their legs had made the decision. Rima stood.

"The registry rang me," Femke said. "Yesterday, at nine. A man called Adriaan, he was very kind, he did it properly. He said he had the list. He said he'd be telling you at the same time."

"Nobody told me."

"Mm. I found out about an hour after." Femke looked at her hands. "They'd put you down as the second contact, and the second contact went through the roster phone, and the roster phone's been with the lock office, hasn't it, since the second shift went out. I thought you knew. I thought you knew and you'd come when you could."

"I saw the list on a tray at dispatch."

"Oh," said Femke. She said, "Oh, that's the wrong way round, that's the wrong way to see it," and Rima found that nothing in the kindness of that was bearable, so she looked at the shelf of mugs.

They were all white, all chipped, all marked with a bit of coloured tape on the handle so that the night crews would know whose they were. A red one, a yellow one, one with a stripe of blue. And at the end, a mug with a strip of paper tape on the handle and one word on it in a thick marker, in a hand Rima would have known across a river. *BOAT.*

She had to put her own hand against the shelf.

Nine days ago it had been warm for the season, and Dani had walked her down to the berth after her shift without telling her where

they were going. He did it the same way he had done everything since they were children, by starting to talk about something else. He told her about the late workers who crossed to the Spur side, the electricians, the crane people, the cleaners off the evening contracts, and how the last ferry went at twenty to eleven and there was nothing again until ten past five. He told her about a bloke who'd slept in a bus shelter for two winters because the launch ran only on request and the request was a form. He told her all this while he was lifting a tarpaulin off a hull, and when the tarpaulin came off there was a launch under it, eleven metres of old steel with the paint gone to rust at the chines and a deckhouse he had clearly rebuilt in the evenings, with brass and varnish on it like a joke he had been telling for a year.

"She'll need a survey," she had said.

"It's a boat, Rima. They do tend to be wet."

"She needs a survey, and a different engine, and I want to know why that lantern's *green*."

He had laughed so that his whole face went. She had walked round the launch once, and then again, with her hand along the strake, and the thing she could not forgive was that she had enjoyed it. She had wanted it to work. She had stood with her hand on his old steel boat and thought, with a feeling she did not trust, that with a different engine and a proper pump and a bit of money from someone, it might.

Femke had come down after her night shift. She had stood at the top of the slip in her coat with a bag of rolls, and when Dani told her what the engine would cost, she had not shouted. She had put the bag on a bollard. She had said, "That's the money for the lease," and he had said, "It's *our* money," and she had said, very exactly, "It's in your name. I'm a user. I've been a user for four years," and Rima, standing on a slip with her hand on a strake, had said, because she was the sensible one, because she was the person who helped, "Let's all look at the numbers."

She remembered the exact tone she had used. She remembered Femke's look, that single look.

"He called me," Rima said. Her voice sounded slightly formal in the cold room. "Not you. He called dispatch. It came up as the crew line and Nessa couldn't get the headset on, and I answered."

Femke's face did not change. A ladle's worth of time went by.

"Of course he did," she said. "It's a work line. He'd call the dispatcher before he'd call me. He'd want to know about the shift." She looked up. "Did he sound like him?"

"Yes."

"Properly?"

"He told me it's a boat and they tend to be wet."

"Oh," said Femke, and put the back of her hand to her mouth, and laughed, once, with such terror in it that Rima took half a step towards her. "That's what I was afraid of. They asked me yesterday if I wanted the line opened to me. When they could. I said, ask me tomorrow. I thought if it was something I had to answer it would be someone else. I thought it would be like a— a recording. And you're telling me it's him."

"It's him."

"And he's in a room."

"A small one. There's a fan."

"Did he ask for me?"

"It was the first thing he asked."

Femke nodded slowly, several times. A mug on the shelf, the red one, had slipped a little off its rim, and she put out one hand and set it straight.

"I've got forty lunches," she said. "It's a real number, Rima, it isn't a way of saying no. If I go in that room today and he's him, I won't be able to cook for anyone tonight, and there are two hundred people in there who haven't eaten since the storm, and the high town's kitchens ran out yesterday. I can't be on the boat for it. Do you see? I've got to be here, and I've got to be in the room, and I haven't got a second pair of—"

Her phone went on the tin table. It was a harsh ring, a registry ring, and they both looked at it.

She answered it with the speaker on, which Rima noticed and was grateful for.

"Ms Brandt, it's Adriaan Kloos at the quay annex, I'm so sorry to intrude. I can only stay a minute. I wanted to let you know the first-contact review cleared at noon. The line to your household will open at three this afternoon, if you want it. You don't have to take that slot. There's one tomorrow at ten."

"Thank you," said Femke, with the correct steadiness of someone speaking to a bank. "And the account? He says it's the joint one. I need to tell you it's in his name, I'm an authorised user, I can't move—"

"That's the second thing, and it's a harder one." A pause, a rustle. "The standing review on the account runs to ten working days, I'm afraid. I know. It protects the estate, it's designed so that nothing moves while the question of Mr Sayegh's own standing is being looked at, and I can't shorten it. Your user access to the account remains. But as I understand it, the user tier can't release payments while the holder is under review."

"I have a supplier who was paid by that account on Monday. I've got a baker who took a bounce this morning."

"I understand." He did. It was in his voice. "There's also a third thing, and I've left it till last because it's the one with a clock on it. The crew plan covers three days of keeping support from the time of continuation. That's the plan's own provision, and it ends on Tuesday at noon. After that, the keeping beyond the first three days has to be contracted by a named person, as payer, or the line goes to storage. Not deletion. Storage. He would not be reachable."

"How much?"

"Eleven hundred a week, on the basic tier. I'm sorry. I'd have said it kindly if there were a kind way."

Femke looked at the phone as though it had said something in a language she half spoke. Rima watched her do the arithmetic. She

watched her get to the end of it. There was a number in her own head, a number she could have paid, a number that would not break her, and the shaming relief of the number's smallness was so near that she nearly said it before Femke finished.

"Rima can—" Femke said.

"I'll sign," said Rima.

It was out before the sentence in her head had finished. It was quick, and sensible, and generous, the old shape of it, a hand already reaching for the problem.

Femke thanked Adriaan. She rang off. She put the phone face down on the tin and took her hand from it carefully.

"That's what I thought you'd say," she said.

"It's a small amount."

"Small," said Femke. Her voice was pleasant. "You can, I'm sure. I'm only trying to find out where I'd be, in that."

The noise of the canteen came through the door in a wave, a clatter of trays and somebody calling for more bread. Femke stood. She retied the cloth in her hair with the same two movements as before, and Rima, who had a hundred good sentences ready, found that none of them would go in the space between the crate and the door.

"Tuesday noon," Femke said. "Three o'clock today, if I take it. Forty lunches before either."

She went out. Rima stood in the cold store among the onions and the chipped mugs, looking at one with a strip of paper tape on its handle. The pass was loud beyond the door. A child was asking whether there was a pudding, and a voice that was not tired at all, that had been told to keep going, said there was, but not till after the soup.

3

Seventy hours

The quay annex was a brick building with a green door, a shoe-scraper, and a waiting room that smelled of floor polish. It might have been a dentist's. The registry kept its Meren office on the ground floor and its keeping rooms on the first, up a wide staircase with a rubber-edged tread, and on the wall of the landing hung a framed notice of opening hours with a smaller card beneath it in a different typeface: *Bereavement line: ask at the desk.*

Femke took the three o'clock slot. She had made the decision in the cold store and had not mentioned it again. She washed her face at the canteen sink, changed her apron for a jacket, and told the second to hold the soup until she was back. Rima walked beside her up the low road without talking. At the top of the annex stairs Adriaan Kloos was waiting, a thin, tired man of sixty with a lanyard and a folder, who shook Femke's hand in both of his and then, with a small nod, Rima's.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "He's been awake since this morning. I don't say that to hurry you. I mean that he isn't frightened of the room any more. It's a perfectly ordinary one, as you'll see."

It was. The service room was three metres by three and a half, with a table, three chairs, a box of tissues nobody had touched, and a window onto the backs of other buildings. On the table stood a speaker the size of a loaf, grey, with a small amber light on its front that Rima noticed she was looking at as if it were a face. A fan turned in the ceiling.

"It's the household slot," said Adriaan. "He's asked that you both be present for the first part, if you're willing. There's a panel available. He's asked to leave it off today. After that it's his to arrange. I'll be outside."

He went. The door closed with a small cushioned click, and they stood in a room with a speaker.

"Hello?" said Femke, and her voice cracked in the middle.

"You're *there*," said Dani.

It came out of the loaf-shaped grey thing with no processing at all, no sheen, no echo, the same ordinary warm baritone with a rasp in it that he had had since fifteen. It was just Dani, slightly out of breath, as though he had run up a stair.

Femke put both hands on the table.

"I'm here," she said.

"I thought they'd keep you out. I've been arguing with the woman about it since the morning, she kept saying review, review, I said I'm not sure what you think I've done. You look tired. You can't see me, can you? I can't see you either. Have you eaten?"

"I've been feeding two hundred people."

"That isn't what I asked."

"A roll."

"A roll isn't a meal."

"Don't tell me what's a meal." She was laughing and crying with her mouth shut, and the laugh was the one that came out. "I've left the soup with Sander's nephew. He'll put salt in it twice."

"Every time. Tell him it's not a competition." He drew a breath and Rima heard it, and for one long second the room was still. "They told me what happened to me. A woman called Ineke, at the beginning, with a script. I could hear she'd said it before, she did the pause in the right place. I said, 'Right,' like she'd told me a bus was cancelled."

"Dani," said Femke.

"Yes, yes. I won't be clever about it. Not for about one more minute."

Rima stood at the end of the table. She had not been named yet. She was aware of her hands.

"Rima's here too," Femke said.

"I know. I can hear her not saying anything." It was gentle, and it still went into her like a splinter. "It's the breathing. You do it through your nose when you're working something out. Hello, Rima."

"Hello."

"How's the lock?"

"It's fine."

"Is it?"

"The east leaf bearing's flat by about a semitone," she said, and heard herself, and heard him laugh.

"There she is."

It was good for several minutes. Rima would hold on to that later, in the middle of other things. For a few minutes they were three people in a room with a fan, and one of them was a speaker. Femke asked whether he knew about the mug. He said of course, he'd put BOAT on it himself, but she must tell the night crew not to use it, because they'd put sugar in it, and the whole point of that mug was no sugar. He asked about the baker. He asked, with the particular wheedling reasonableness that meant he wanted something enormous, whether Rima could go to the yard.

"What yard?"

"Ploeg's. The slip. The launch." He said it as if she had asked what planet. "They're holding her till Friday. I put down a deposit for a survey slot and I've got the balance to pay by the end of the week, or they give the berth to the man with the barge, and the account says it's *under review*, it won't even let me look at the figure. Femke, you know the figure. Is it still in the account?"

"It's in the account," said Femke. "You can't move it."

"I only want to—"

"You can't." A pause. "Neither can I. It's in your name."

"I know whose name it's in."

"I'm a user. I can't release it. They told me ten working days."

"Ten *days*?" A long exhale. "Rima, that's the rest of my— that's the *slot*. You could ring Ploeg. You could tell him it's coming. You'd know what to say, you've got the voice for it."

"I'll ring him."

"Say it'll be there."

"I'll say you'll be in touch."

"That isn't the same."

"No." She was keeping her voice down, and it was costing something. "It isn't."

She knew precisely what she was going to ask. She had known it since the dispatch room, and the question had been working through her all afternoon like a splinter working to the surface.

"Dani," she said. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"You've asked me that."

"Yes. I'm trying to understand it. If it's only the shift, if you're missing the night, there are other ways we can—"

"The shift?"

Her eyes went to the amber light, and then, helplessly, to the window.

"Mr Kloos showed me the page," Dani said. His voice had changed. It had gone careful rather than hard, the way a person's voice goes when he is standing on something he hasn't tested. "It says seventy hours and twelve minutes. Before the barrier closed. That's the last time I sat in the chair at the annex downstairs and the technician put the cuff on. A Monday. I was thinking about a bilge pump. I had a paper cup of the awful tea. I remember she told me to hold still and I said I was holding still, and she said, 'You're holding still like a man who's thinking about a bilge pump.' And that's the last one. Then there's the fan."

"Seventy hours," said Rima.

"Three days, near enough. Not a night. I've lost *Tuesday*, Rima. I've lost Wednesday. I'd got an appointment on Wednesday with a man

about a chart table." He stopped. "I'd got a lot of Thursday. I was going to show you the launch again, with the new engine in her. I'd asked Femke to bake the cheese ones for you."

"I did," said Femke. "They're in the freezer."

Rima saw it land. She saw something go out of the amber light, or imagined it, a small relaxation, a change in the quality of a room.

"Well, that's a waste," said Dani, thickly. "I'd have wanted one."

Nobody said anything. The fan turned. Then Femke, because Femke could, said what Rima had been unable to say in four attempts and one dispatch room: "There was a storm. It was a bad one. They closed the barrier on Thursday night and flooded the Spur to save the lower city, and it worked, twelve thousand people got across. Nine people on the Spur didn't. You're one. Adina Stoica's another."

"Adina," said Dani. It was almost a question, and then it wasn't. "She does the lights. She tells that terrible joke about the electrician and the sheep." A breath. "She's down there with me, isn't she."

"Yes."

"Twelve thousand," said Dani. "That's— that's the whole lower city, near enough." His voice was doing something extraordinary, climbing and cracking, pride and nausea in one sound. "It worked?"

"It worked," said Femke.

"Good," said Dani. "Good. I'd have wanted it to."

She had one more question. Its edges were so tidy. She had been polishing it for twenty-six hours.

"Dani. The last shift. What did Nessa tell you to do on Thursday? Where were you told to wait? Did anyone say a time, did—"

"Rima."

"If you can remember even one—"

"I don't have it." He didn't shout. He said it as he said everything, with a rasp under it. "You keep asking me like I'm hiding it. I'd give it to you. I can't look at it, it isn't there, there's a fan, and then there's the bilge pump, and a wall of nothing in between. You're asking the room

where the thing would be. I know you have to. I just don't want it to be the first thing you ask when you come in."

"I was—"

"I know what you were. You're being useful." He sounded almost fond. "Go and get a coffee."

"Dani—"

"I want to talk to Femke on my own, Rima. Go and get a coffee. Please."

The amber light went on glowing. Rima stood with her hand on the back of the chair. For a moment she felt herself move towards argument with such force that her whole body tilted, as at the edge of a lock. Then she saw Femke's face. She had not turned towards Rima at all. She was looking at the grey loaf on the table with the open look of a woman who has been, for a few minutes, allowed to stop managing.

"All right," she said.

"Thank you."

She went out. The door closed behind her with its small cushioned click.

The corridor was long and cool and lit by a skylight that had streaks of old rain on it. At one end a vending machine glowed. At the other end Adriaan Kloos stood with his folder, looking at nothing, in a manner so exact and so kind that she knew he had practised it. She found, after some seconds, that she was kneeling at the service-room door with her fingers on its closer, a heavy hydraulic arm on a spring plate, feeling for the play in the pivot.

She stopped, looked at what she was doing, and went on doing it. The pivot had a quarter-turn of slack. She would have put a note on it, in any other building.

"It's a slow closer," said Adriaan, from behind her. "It's meant to be."

"It's got slack in the pivot."

"I'll tell facilities."

"Tell them it won't matter," said Rima, "until it does." She rose. Her knees hurt. "What does the page say?"

"Which page?"

"The one you showed him. Seventy hours."

He hesitated, and then opened the folder and handed it to her without comment. It was a single sheet. A header with the registry's mark. *Continuation record.* A name, a date of keeping, an interval counted from that date to the time the harbour barrier closed, in the unadorned language of an office that has said it before. *Last keeping: 70 h 12 min before.* Below it, a line of small print: *State carried: relational and working context at date of keeping. Experience subsequent to that date is not held.*

"It's a conversation, mostly," Adriaan said. "The keeping. People think it's a recording, it isn't. The technician asks, he answers, the system carries who he is to the next time. It's the relationship that's held, not the film. We don't have what Mr Sayegh saw on Thursday. Nobody does, in that sense. What we have is who he was on the Monday. That's how the crew plan works. It keeps by session, in a room like this one, and it doesn't draw on the household record at all. The scheme has kept people that way since its first year, nineteen years ago."

"And everything since?"

"Anything that went into a system," he said. "Messages he sent. Entries with his name on. Records of where he was booked. Those are held, they're evidence like any other, and he can be told what they say. He would know it, though, the way you'd know it from a report. He wouldn't remember it."

She read the page again. It said exactly what he had said.

"Is he all right?" she said.

"I think he's very nearly entirely himself," said Adriaan. "That isn't the same as all right."

The door of the service room did not open for twenty-three minutes. Rima spent them standing at the vending machine, buying a cup of tea she did not want and holding it until it was cold. Once, close to the end, Femke laughed, one short honest sound with water

in it, and Rima put the cup down on the machine's ledge and looked at the skylight, and discovered that the thing she was feeling was not jealousy, though it had the same temperature.

When the door opened, it was not Femke who came out but a stranger, a woman of about fifty-five in a dark waterproof, who had evidently been waiting on the staircase for some while and had elected to take the stairs two at a time.

"Ms Sayegh," she said. "Teun Haverkamp. I'm leading the independent inquiry into the Spur. I'm sorry about your brother. I have no way to say that which isn't also a procedure, so I've said it, and we can move on."

"Thank you."

"I'm told you're the lock engineer who did the harbour integration review two years ago. I'm also told you're next of kin, and that you were on the first call, and that you've been in a room with him just now." She looked at the closed door. "You've got three things at once and none of them are mine to take away. I want your technical help. I need to be able to say to a room of lawyers that you gave it, declared, with your relationship and your signature on the table, and that other people weighed what you said. You wouldn't be the judge of anything. You'd be a witness who can read the drawings."

"What does that mean in practice?"

"It means I'll be rude to you," said Teun Haverkamp, "and keep a record of it. Five o'clock, the harbour authority annex, second floor. Bring whatever you've got on the integration history. Bring your own notes if you kept them."

"I kept notes," she said.

4

The opening command

She rang the yard from the stairwell, because she had said she would.

Ploeg answered on the ninth ring, with an engine running somewhere behind him and a man shouting about a hawser. He listened to everything she said, which was short, and then told her he was sorry for her loss, and that he meant it, and that Friday was Friday. "I'll hold her till noon," he said. "Not a minute after. I've got a barge man in the yard office doing a good impression of a hungry dog, and I can't feed him sentiment." She thanked him. She wrote *Fri 12:00, Ploeg* on the back of her hand, which she had not done since she was nineteen, and went up the second flight with the ink drying.

The harbour authority annex was a long grey block with a lobby like a bus station and a lift that had been out of order since the storm. On the second floor, behind a door marked *Records*, someone had pushed three tables together and covered the window blinds with a sheet of brown paper. Two wall screens, one on each side of the room. A trolley of cables. A kettle on a filing cabinet. And in front of the left screen, standing up because the chairs were bad, a woman in a dark waterproof winding a wristwatch with the care of a person defusing something.

"It's three minutes fast," said Teun Haverkamp, without looking round. "I set it that way so I'm early for what I'm already late for. Sit anywhere that isn't a box file."

There were a great many box files. They had come, Rima saw, in the same hour as the man who sat among them, a young man in a good

jumper with a ring binder open on each knee and a third on the floor at his feet, holding a pen cap in his teeth. He was twenty-nine or thereabouts, with a pale anxious face and the neatly furious hair of someone who had pushed his hands through it for two days. He half stood when she came in. His binder slid. He caught it, and three loose sheets went down on the lino like leaves.

"Joost Kuipers," Teun said. "He wrote the adapter that sits between dispatch clearances and the planning layer. He's here voluntarily, which in my experience means he's the person most afraid of being here. Mr Kuipers, this is Ms Sayegh, who reviewed your integration package two years ago and whose brother is on the list. She's here as a declared technical contributor. I've logged that, and I've logged the risk of it in the same entry; if it stops being a risk I'll say so and take her out in the same log. You'll want to say something about her brother, and you should do it now so that it's done."

"I'm sorry," said Joost. "I mean I'm very— I'd like to say that I'm sorry about your brother, and also that I haven't had access to all of the— that the adapter doesn't make decisions, it translates, so I don't think it's accurate to say— I'm sorry. That's the wrong order. I'm sorry about your brother."

"Thank you," said Rima.

"I've brought the specification. I've got the interface contracts for all five sources, the change history, I've brought the test records from the original integration—"

"Mr Kuipers," said Teun, "sit."

He sat. Rima took a chair that had the least wrong legs, and put her bag on the floor, and her own notebook on the table. It was a school exercise book, with a green cover and a picture of a lighthouse. She had never found a better way to keep a record that didn't crash. She saw Teun look at it and say nothing.

"Two screens, and I want to be tedious about them," said Teun. "The one on the left is what ran. It's the preserved deployment state, the commands as issued, the rules as they stood on the night, the cer-

tificates as they were. It was frozen under a preservation order about nine hours after the storm, and I've got that order extended to eight o'clock tonight, and I've been told by counsel that renewing it is probable and not certain. The one on the right is what would run today. It's a fresh instance of the planning layer, given the same inputs. It's useful. It isn't evidence. If anyone in this room tells me that the right-hand screen proves what the left-hand one did, I'll stop the session."

"Understood," said Rima.

"I'm saying it to him as well."

"Yes," said Joost, "yes. Of course."

"Good." Teun touched the table and the left screen woke.

Nothing on it was green. It was grey and orderly and made of strips. There was a timeline across the top, a thin rule with a few marked points, and under it, stacked one above another like a row of shelves, a set of horizontal bars, each with a label at its left end and a small seal at its right. Rima read the labels from the top. She had spent two years of her working life reading documents that looked like this.

Ferry priority: evacuation vessel, high-town crossing. VALID.

Barrier closure window: tide model, surge model, river flow. VALID.

Spur reserve volume: suitability for controlled fill. VALID *(design basis).*

Q6 surface route: clearance for return launch. VALID.

Q6 site roster: no assignment. VALID.

Occupancy of floodable footprint: none. SATISFIED.

Below them, on its own line, wider than the rest, the thing they had come for. *Feeder gate F2: open. Actuated by water control on acceptance of composed sequence. Emergency profile: within certified envelope.*

The whole column, each seal in a small green circle, a row of ticks.

"Who cleared it?" said Rima.

It was out before anyone had asked her to speak, and Joost looked at her with mounting alarm.

"Cleared which?" said Teun.

"The feeder. The command. Who said open."

Teun's mouth moved slightly. "Look at the last line again."

Rima looked. *On acceptance of composed sequence.* She read it twice more. "Water control accepted it."

"Water control's system accepted it. Under an emergency profile that lets a composed sequence actuate without a person pressing a key, provided every certificate in the chain is valid and the sequence stays inside what the profile covers." Teun's voice was even. "The profile was signed by the authority two years before the storm. There was an evacuation-ferry exercise the year before that, and the profile came out of it. The reasoning in the file is good. When the barrier is closing and a ferry is mid-channel, a person who has to be found, woken, briefed and asked to press a key is a person who can't do it in time."

"So no one said open."

"The composition said open. The profile said it could. The people who signed the profile said it could, in conditions they described."

"Who signed the profile?"

"The authority's operations board, on the director's recommendation. Anja Rohe's name is on the cover sheet."

Rima turned back to the bars. She looked at the bar for the occupancy of the floodable footprint, the last green seal before the command.

"That's Mr Kuipers's," she said.

"That's the adapter's," said Joost, rapidly. "It's a derived value. It doesn't come from a source, it's computed from two other inputs by a rule. I want to be clear that the rule is documented. It's in section four of the specification, it's been in since the second release, it was in the version Ms Sayegh reviewed—"

"Which two inputs?"

"The route clearance and the site roster." He had half risen, a binder on his knee, thumbing for a page. "Route clearance is dispatch's. Roster is the contractor ledger's. They're two independent sources,

they've got different owners, different update paths, they don't share a database, that's a design point, that's deliberate, so that if either one's wrong the other doesn't— they're independent. The rule says if the surface route is clear, and the roster shows no assignment against the site, then—"

"Then occupancy is none."

"Then occupancy is— no." He stopped. His thumb stopped on the page. "It doesn't say none. It says no assignment. The *none* is a— that's a label, that's what the downstream consumer reads it as, it's— wait. Let me show you."

He dug in a ring binder, and it jammed on its rings, and he wrenched it, and a drift of tabbed paper slid across the table. Rima picked up the sheet nearest her hand and found it was a page of interface contract, with the words *Status: no assignment against site code* in a box. She read the line under it. *Consumers must not infer occupancy state from absence of assignment.*

She looked at Joost. He had gone white.

"That's the source's own contract," he said. "That's what the contractor ledger guarantees. And the adapter— the adapter does infer it. In the composed layer. Because the rule has to produce a value, and the value has to be one the planning layer can use, and I— we—" He looked at the page in her hand. "That's in section four. The inference. It's documented. It's *flagged*. There's a note."

"Where's the note?"

He found it. It was a small italic line at the foot of a page of dense type. *Occupancy derivation assumes site roster is complete for the site.* Rima read it and felt something drop through her, the soft, specific drop of a floor that wasn't where the plan said.

"Was this in the package I reviewed?" she said.

"Yes."

"I read that package."

"Yes. I— yes. You signed it." He said it without malice. "You were— your review was very thorough, everyone said. It's why I thought—" He stopped. "It's why it went through."

"It was complete," said Rima.

She said it as the statement of a fact she had never had cause to examine. Teun, standing by the screen with the watch in her hand, did not remark on it. Her eyes went from Rima to Joost and back.

"It's good that you've both said that," she said. "I'll want both of you to say it again in writing. Mr Kuipers, the note is a note. It isn't the question. The question is why every one of these six seals could be valid and the thing still be wrong. I want the left screen walked through, strip by strip, with someone who knows what each of them was in a position to know." She tapped the third bar. "Start there. Spur reserve volume, suitability, design basis. What did it rest on?"

"An old design document," said Joost. "And a— a consultation summary. It's been in the system for years. It was accepted by a named reviewer at the authority. I haven't seen the original. I mean I've seen the summary. Do you want me to—"

"Later. Fourth bar."

Rima was already looking at it. *Q6 surface route: clearance for return launch. VALID.* It had a seal like the others, a small green circle, and beside the seal, in the type used for provenance, a line she had passed over and now came back to.

Source: dispatch voice clearance, operator N. Visser. Recorded.

"That's a voice," she said.

"It's the dispatcher's clearance, spoken and logged," said Joost. "The speech layer produces a structured message. 'Q6 clear for launch.' It's the standard form. The adapter reads the structured message, it doesn't read the audio, nobody reads the audio unless something goes wrong. I've never—" He looked at Teun. "Has anyone listened to it?"

"Not yet," said Teun. She turned the wristwatch on her hand and looked at it, then at the grey blind with its sheet of brown paper. "It's on a separate store. Dispatch audio rolls off in the small hours of

every morning, and I've got a hold on it, and I've got a woman at the authority who's been reasonable about it and may stop. I want the first thing we test to be that clearance. Not what it was taken to mean. What she said, to whom, and from where she was standing."

"From where she was standing?" said Joost.

"It's a quay, Mr Kuipers. It's a place. People stand in it."

Rima turned a page of the lighthouse notebook. She had written nothing, so far, but the date. She wrote, underneath it, in the small square hand she used for lock logs, Q6 *clear for launch — who, where, said what*? and under it, because it was in her head and would not go away, *roster complete for the site?*

"I'll go to the quay," she said.

"You'll go," said Teun, "when Ms Visser has agreed to take you, and not before. She's been clear with my colleagues. She's a witness, not a source. She'll talk to you if you walk it with her and don't ask her to hand over anything. I've got a recorder you can carry. It's switched on while you're walking, it's on the record, and you'll tell her so." She looked at the screen, at the small column of green ticks, and then, with something that was not quite procedure, at Rima. "She's got an arm in a sling and three days without sleep. Don't be efficient at her."

"I'm not—"

Rima looked down. She had already ruled a margin on the lighthouse page and headed two columns, Ask and Don't, and the first was full. She turned the page over. Teun wound the watch again, one click, as if checking that it still worked. "Tomorrow, first light. Mr Kuipers, you'll stay. We're going to take the adapter apart a strip at a time, and I will want to know, before you say anything, what each part was told."

Joost, who had begun to gather his papers into the binder, stopped. Outside the brown-papered window a gull cried, and then the building's ventilation changed note, and the left screen held its row of seals: six green circles in a column, each one true, each one sound.

Rima looked at the fourth.

Recorded. It was the first word in that column, in six strips, that she had not already known what to think about. She put her pen down on the page, and found that the ink from Ploeg's name on the back of her hand had smudged across the heel of her palm into a small blue mark, like a bruise.

5

Clear

The Outer Spur was reached by the causeway road, a mile of wet tarmac with the main basin on one side and the channel on the other, and at first light on the fourth morning it was the only place in Meren that looked tidied. The dive team's trucks stood in a neat row on the hardstanding. A generator hummed behind a tent. Somebody had hung out a line of orange suits to drip, each on its own peg, as though they were to be inspected.

Nessa was waiting at the Spur gate with her good hand in her coat pocket and the other strapped across her chest under it. She had a flask under her arm, tucked there like a baton. Her face was grey, and she looked precisely as she had in the dispatch room, except that someone had made her wash her hair.

"You're early," she said.

"It's ten to."

"That's early. Gijs says nobody comes ten to. He says people come at five past with an excuse." She started to smile, remembered the tooth, and stopped. "I've been told to say this's all on the record. Is it on the record?"

"It's on the record." Rima took the little recorder from her jacket and held it up so that the red light was in plain view. "It's on while we walk. It goes off if you ask. I'm not allowed to ask you to hand anything over, and if I forget that, you can say so."

"Who told you that?"

"Teun Haverkamp."

"Hm." Nessa looked at the light. "She's all right. She rang me herself. Most of them send someone." She turned and walked through the gate, and Rima, who had walked behind Nessa Visser into a room a few days ago without noticing that she had, now noticed.

It was a long walk. The Spur lay along the south side of the harbour like a bent arm, a hundred and eighty metres of old quay on the channel side, with the reserve basin tucked behind it where the elbow turned, and the landings numbered from the gate: Q1, Q2, and on. Nessa named each as they passed, in the manner of someone doing a roll call she knew by heart. "Q2, that's cranes. Q3 is the cold store, you don't go in Q3 in your good shoes. Q4's dead, they're going to fill it. Q5's the oil people, and they're a nightmare." She slowed. "Q6."

They stopped.

It did not look like much, and Rima, who had stood in front of a good many places that did not, felt a small cold moving along her forearms. The quay at Q6 was wide, with a lane painted yellow along its edge: three metres of tarmac between the stacked pallets on one side and the drop to the water on the other. At the lane's river end a flight of broad stone steps ran down to a landing stage, where the return launch tied up. Halfway along, on the inland side, a pair of steel doors stood open on a wide stair that went down into shadow. The dive team's hoarding stood round it, with a tender's rope coiled on a bollard, and a hose running down.

The wall of the stairwell, as far as she could see into it, had a stain on it. It was a long brown line, level as a rule, and it was a good way above her head.

"That's the mark," said Nessa. "They've not washed it. They said not to."

"Where does the stair go?"

"Down to the gallery." A short silence. "You've never been in the gallery?"

"I've walked past the lane. A hundred times. I've always been going somewhere with a clipboard." Rima kept her voice light. "I remember a bench, in a doorway."

"A bench in a doorway." Nessa gave a short breath through her nose that might have been laughter. "There are four benches, a kettle shelf, and a lamp that's been on since before I came. It's brick, it's vaulted, it's dry, it's the best waiting room on the Spur. When it rains the crews come in from the lane and sit. When the launch comes in they hear it and go up the stair and out along the quay and down the steps. It's been that way twice as long as I've been here."

Rima looked at the open doors, and at the dark below them, and the brown line on the wall.

She had something ready. She had been polishing it since the annex, and she heard it arrive in her mouth in the neatest possible order, and she said it. "So on the night, you cleared Q6, and the contractor ledger said nobody was assigned there, and the planning layer read the two together as the quay being empty."

"I did not clear Q6," said Nessa.

She said it in the voice of a woman correcting a figure.

"It's on the log. Q6 surface route, clearance for return launch. It's in your name."

"Clearance for the launch." Nessa took her hand out of her coat pocket. "Say it with me."

"I don't—"

"Say it. What did I say?"

"Q6 clear for the launch."

"Which bit of Q6?"

Rima looked around her. The quay. The lane. The steps. The stair going down. "The lane," she said. "The part by the steps."

"The lane. Right." Nessa walked her down it, six paces, to the head of the landing steps, and stood with her back to the water and the good hand held out over the lane. "'Q6 clear for the launch' means one thing. It means the launch can come alongside here, and take people

off, and there's nothing in the lane to stop it. No forklift. No crane slewing. No pallet in the yellow. I say it forty times a week. I say it when the lane's clear of plant. I have said it when a man was *standing* in the lane, if he was a man who was going to step off it when the boat came. It's a lane word." She took a breath. "It's not a quay word. It's not about the gallery. It's not about who's under the deck."

"But the people were—"

"The people moved out of the lane into the gallery, as soon as I said it. As they always do. As they're meant to. That's where the clearing *goes*, Rima. That's the whole use of the gallery." Her voice cracked at the last word. She pressed her mouth shut and waited. "I cleared the lane because I had a hold on the launch and I wanted nobody standing in the yellow when the wind was blowing, and what I did was put forty people in the dry."

"Forty?"

"Eleven." She said it at once, and then looked at her own hand as though it had spoken out of turn. "Eleven on the list. I said forty because it's how many I say. It was eleven, I've told the inspectors, I've told them four times, I keep saying forty. It was eleven."

Rima had not moved.

Being wrong, she found, had a physical component. It sat low in the stomach and made her want to look at something. She looked at the head of the steps, at the iron ring set in the stone.

"All right," she said. "The lane. Show me which lane."

"That one." Nessa pointed along the yellow. "From the steps to the third bollard. The rest's the crane's."

"And the launch was held."

"You'll want to hear it. They'll have given you it. Teun said she'd send."

Rima took the tablet out of her bag. A records clerk had left it for her at the annex, with a sticky note on its back in a tidy hand that said *Dispatch audio, Q6, one clip, 1 min 12.* She held it where Nessa could see the screen, and pressed play.

There was wind on it first, a great hollow roar with rain thrown in, and then a hiss of channel, and then the harbour's dispatch voice, Nessa's, thinner than in life and a good deal calmer.

Q6 clear for the launch. Launch is held for the ferry, I'll call it when she's through. Gijs, pallets out of the yellow and tell the crane to stay at the Spur end, I don't want the jib over the lane. Q6 gallery, this is dispatch. A crackle. *Return crew, launch is held, you've got about twenty. Stay in the dry.*

The clip ended in wind.

Nobody said anything. A gull was walking on the dive team's hose.

"I said stay in the dry," said Nessa.

"You didn't know."

"I said it. I said *stay*. I'd have said it to anyone. They'd have come out if it had been bright, they'd have been out on the lane having a smoke in the rain." She shut her eyes. "I don't want you to tell me it's fine. If you tell me it's fine I'll go and be sick on the dive team's hose."

Rima said nothing, and it was the right thing, and she did not know how she had known.

It was a minute, perhaps more, before Nessa opened her eyes. Her phone rang. It rang in her coat pocket, a thin electronic trill, and she took it out with the good hand and looked at the screen and answered it without apology, in the middle of the breath she had been taking.

"Yes. Yes, hello, Mrs Tol, it's me. No, she can have the second blanket, she's allowed, I told the night nurse. No, I can't today, I'll be in tomorrow at four. Tell him it's the one with the stripe. Yes. Yes. Thank you." She hung up. "My father," she said. "He's cold. They're very good. I pay for it, they're good. I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"I only say, it's not that I'm— that I haven't got a life that's mine. They've all got ideas about me, the inspectors. A woman with a tooth missing and a clipboard." She slid the phone away. "It makes it easier to explain things to them if they think it's all I am."

Rima walked to the gallery doors and looked down.

He was somewhere below that line. It was a fact, and she looked at it as she would have looked at the face of a gate. The stair went down in a long wide flight. Brown water had dried on the steps in tide-lines, in a pale scum of silt along the treads, a few of which had broken. Beyond the bend of the wall she could see nothing. A wire hung over the first step with a lamp on it, switched off, and the cold coming up out of that stairwell had a taste of iron and old stone. At the head of the flight, the steel door had a small enamel plate screwed to it at eye level: *Q6 waiting gallery. Capacity 40. Emergency exit via rear stair.*

"There's a back stair," she said.

"Yes. Down at the back. They could have gone that way." Nessa's voice was firm. "Two ways out, always been. The front and the back. That's why it's licensed."

"Where does the back stair come out?"

"On the— by the old pump house. The Spur side."

Rima turned her head. At the end of the quay, behind the dive team's hoarding, a section of the hoarding's plywood had been propped open, and beyond it she could see a second, narrower flight. It was railed in a different colour. A sheet of weatherproof tag hung on a steel hasp across the top, with a printed header and a date.

She walked across to it. She read it, once, from the top.

"*Closed for survey*," she said. "*Third of March.*"

"It's never been—"

"It's been shut since March." She said it without any weight, and Nessa heard it without any, and they stood and looked at the tag in the grey light. "There's a drainage survey. Someone was looking at a collapse in the old passage behind it. That's why they tagged it. Capacity forty, two exits, and for seven months it's been one."

Nessa put the good hand to her mouth. She stood still. When she took the hand away, her face had a drawn, clean look, as if something had been wiped off it.

"I don't go that way," she said. "I've never— I forget. It's round the back of the pump house. I only ever see the front."

"Nobody told you."

"Nobody told me. And I never asked." She looked down at the sling. "That's mine, as well. That's a thing I could have known. You can put that on your recorder."

"I will."

"Good."

They stood at the hoarding. Behind them the divers' generator turned over and settled, and the line of orange suits dripped on the stones. After a time Rima said, because it was the next thing, and she had been told not to be efficient, and was being it anyway, "The shift book."

Nessa did not move.

"You've got one. Teun's heard about it."

"Everyone's heard about it." It was said without heat. "Everyone knows I keep a book. A school one, a green one, not like yours." She nodded at Rima's bag, where the lighthouse notebook had been, and Rima felt her face warm. "I keep it by the console. It's got who swapped with whom, who stayed an hour for whom, who left early and came in early. All the relief hours, all the arrangements, the ones that don't go in the roster. Because if it goes in the roster, the pay system reads it as absence without cover and docks them. A man covers his friend's hour, he's a hero in my book and a deduction in theirs."

"And on the night?"

"It'll have something. It'll have who was where, in the last hours, by what I knew. Not who was *in* the gallery. Who I thought was coming, who I was keeping an eye out for." She breathed in. "It'll tell you more about the last shift than the roster does, and I'm not giving it to you."

"I'm not allowed to ask you to hand anything—"

"Right. I'm saying it first, so you don't have to." She turned, at last, and looked at Rima with an expression of such blunt, tired courtesy that Rima, who had braced for anger, found herself without a place to put the brace. "If it goes in, the entries go in. Every one. And I know what happens to those. A man who swapped a Tuesday off the books

gets a letter. A woman who's on a visa gets a worse one. Half of the people in that book are alive and have rent. I'll not hand them in as an exhibit so that someone can write *relief arrangements not recorded in accordance with policy* against nine families' names and call it a finding."

"If I keep it out of the record—"

"You keep it out, a clerk puts it in. You mean well. They don't need you to mean well." Her tongue went to the gap. "Get me something in writing from the people who can give it. The contractors, the authority, whoever signs the pay. That no one gets a penny taken for an entry that's in my book and not on their roster. Wages and compensation both. That's all it is. Get me that and you'll have the book by lunch."

"That's not mine to give."

"It isn't. That's why I'm asking."

It was reasonable. It was infuriating. Rima, who had been told in the annex not to be efficient at this woman, found she was already assembling the list of people to ring and the order in which she would ring them, and that the list was the one useful thing she had felt in four days.

"Can I ask what's in the book for the last hour?" she said. "Not the entries. Just whether it exists."

"It exists." Nessa's face moved. "It stops at ten to ten. After that I was on the phone to water control and I wasn't writing."

Rima stood with that. It was quiet on the quay. Below them, in the dark of the stair, something small dripped on stone, and kept dripping, a slow sound.

"What did you say to water control?" she said.

Nessa did not answer at once. She was looking along the lane, at the yellow edge and the third bollard and the broad steps going down to the empty landing stage.

"I said stop," she said. "You'll hear that on a different clip, and you'll hear what they said back, and I would rather it was somebody else who played it to you."

She walked away along the lane, with her arm strapped across her chest and her head held straight, to find the man with the dive team's kettle.

6

Under Q6

The dive team's control tent was larger inside than it looked from the quay, and warmer, and it smelled of neoprene and instant coffee. A trestle table ran down the middle. Three monitors stood at the far end on a plywood shelf, each showing a different grey. Along one canvas wall hung a hand-drawn plan of the gallery on four sheets of flip-chart paper taped edge to edge, with notes in marker pen and a coffee ring over the rear passage.

The dive supervisor was a broad quiet woman called Sietske Rood, with a grey plait and forearms like rope, who had shaken Rima's hand once, formally, and then given her a stool and a cup and nothing to do. She did it so exactly that Rima knew it was policy.

"You've been told how this goes," Sietske said.

"Teun said."

"Say it back to me. I do that with everyone."

"It's a technical inspection. It's to confirm the condition of the gallery and the position of what's left. The feed is masked for everyone in the tent, over anything the team has identified as a person. The mask stays on. It isn't recorded under it. I don't ask for it to be taken off."

"And if you want to leave."

"I leave. I don't have to say why."

"Good." Sietske looked at her for a moment longer than was necessary, and Rima saw that she was weighing something and had decided against saying it. "It's the way the families asked. All of them. Even the ones who said they didn't mind. Adina Stoica's sister asked for no

archive at all, not even masked, and no feed to anyone who wasn't there on the day. So there isn't one. What we're watching is live, and it'll be gone when we turn it off."

"And my brother—"

"Mr Sayegh's partner has been told the inspection is happening. She's chosen not to watch. His continuation has been told too. He asked not to be shown anything and not to be told what we see." She said it without a gloss. "I thought you should hear that before you sit down."

Rima had not known that. She sat with the cup in both hands and the heat coming through the paper and thought, for a moment, of the amber light on a grey speaker. He had asked not to be told. He had been in a room with a fan for two days, and had been given a choice that was his own, and had made it without her, and she was sitting here to watch what he would not.

Teun came in at ten past, wiping rain from her watch face. Nessa came in behind her, with the flask, and took the stool at the end of the table and sat straight with her eyes on nothing in particular. Joost was not there. He was at the annex, taking the adapter apart a strip at a time.

"Right," said Sietske, and woke a monitor.

The first picture was a stair.

It was a tracked vehicle the size of a toolbox, tethered to a cable, with a light on its front and a small arm. It went down the steps of the gallery stair at a patient crawl, with a lurch at every broken tread, and the picture shook and settled and shook, a wet grey wall sliding by on the left, the tide-line in the brickwork passing above the lens like a horizon. At the foot of the stair the floor levelled and the vehicle stopped.

"Front landing," said Sietske to the room. "Forty centimetres. More on day one. Pumps on the front half since Friday. Behind the second arch it doesn't drop."

"Why?" said Rima.

Sietske pointed at the flip-chart plan, at the coffee ring. “Because there’s a way through. At the back of the gallery there’s a section of old passage that’s part-collapsed, behind the wall, and it joins the Spur basin. Every tide it moves. Not much. Enough that I can’t put a diver in the back half, because there’s a current in there I don’t like, and a roof I like less. We can’t pump it down while the connection’s open. We can’t close it while a person’s standing in it.” She ran a finger along the marker. “So it’s a bulkhead. A plate, steel, set across the passage mouth from the front side, with a seal. It has to be designed, and the steel has to be cut, and it has to go in at slack water when a person can stand in the front half and hold it while it’s fixed. The engineer says nine to twelve days. I think she’s right. I’d like her to be wrong.”

“Seven came up from the front half.”

“Seven came up from the front. Two are in the back.” Sietske’s voice did not change. “That’s the whole reason, Ms Sayegh. It’s not the water, or the weather, or the permit. It’s that I can’t put anyone in there to get them out and expect them to come out too.”

It was the most direct statement anyone had made to her in four days.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t. Watch the screen.”

The tracked vehicle moved on through the front landing. Rima had a good eye for dimension and she took the room in as it passed: the first bay of a long vault, brick, round-arched, the arches supported on short stone piers, four wooden benches lying on their sides in the shallow water like a row of felled animals. A shelf along one wall with a kettle on it, still standing. A bracket, and a lamp that had been the one Nessa had talked of, its glass globe whole. On a row of hooks beside the stair, three high-vis jackets and two hard hats hung where they had been put, dry above the waterline, like the coats in a school cloakroom.

Nessa made a small sound and shut her mouth over it.

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't—it's the hats."

Nobody told her it was all right. Sietske moved the vehicle gently past the hooks.

The second arch. The third. The water here was darker, the light began to struggle, and the picture began to carry a smear of silt like breath on a window. A sign came into view on the wall ahead, a rectangle of yellow paint with black stencil letters that had been repainted so many times that the edges ran. It was at about the height of a man's shoulder, and the camera, with its small arm, tilted a few degrees to read it.

R14 — TURNAROUND CREW — WAITING POINT.

Rima read it twice.

"What's R14?" she said.

"It's on every bag," said Sietske, and the picture swung and there they were, a row of canvas tool bags in a row along a low shelf, soaked and slumped and each one stencilled in the same yellow. R14. R14. R14. "It's on the lockers at the back. It's on the hard hats. It's on the sign."

"It's the return crew," said Nessa.

She had not moved from the stool. Her eyes had come off nothing and settled on the monitor with an unblinking expression that Rima had begun to know. "That's what they're called. It's what I've always called them. The turnaround crew, the return crew, R14. I didn't think of it as a *name*. It's a thing you say. 'R14 are waiting,' 'R14's late,' 'tell R14 the launch is held.' They're a contract service. They go out to the Spur side at shift change and come back on the return launch when it's done, they've got a standing arrangement, I don't know whose. Payroll's. I never looked at payroll. They wait down there." She stopped. "They've always waited down there. That's the R14 waiting point. It's a sign."

"It's a code," Rima said slowly.

"It's a sign," said Nessa.

They looked at each other.

Teun already had her phone out. She put it on the trestle, on speaker, and it rang twice before Joost answered, breathless, in what sounded like a stairwell.

"R14," said Teun. "What is it in your ledger?"

"R14." A pause with a door in it. "It's a service code. Turnaround service, contractor side. It's got a supplier, a crew size, a roster, a rate, it's paid weekly." Another pause, longer. "There's no site on it. There was never a site field. I've never had to look at it. It isn't in the adapter's site list at all, it comes through as a service, and the rule only ever asked about sites. I— can I ring you back? I want to look at something."

"Don't check," said Teun. "Write it down."

"Mask's on in a moment," said Sietske, and the screen greyed at the lower right corner, and Rima looked at the plan on the wall instead.

She made herself look at it for as long as it took. On the monitor, beyond her sight, the vehicle moved on a few metres, and there was a soft movement in the light, and a flat grey rectangle floated over the lower right of the picture, then another beside it, perfectly opaque, the colour of the wet wall. Behind her in the tent no one spoke. Teun's watch ticked. The cable ran out with a small dry sound.

"Rear wall," said Sietske. "Two, at the far end. That's as far as I'm taking her."

Nessa had put her good hand over her mouth again. Rima kept her own on the cup. It had gone cold in her hands at some point and she had not noticed, and she thought, clearly and without any grief at all, *I should check whether the rear door is the stair.* It was a sensible thought. She did not, afterwards, forgive it.

"The rear door," she said aloud. "Is that the old stair? The one that's tagged."

"It's a door in the wall." Sietske's hand was on the controls. "It's steel. It's shut. It's the survey tag on the other side that's held it, I should think. It's dogged from the outside. They'd have had no way to open it from in here."

Somebody in the tent breathed out.

"I'll back her out," Sietske said. "That's all there is. I'm not putting a second pass on that."

The picture swung away from the wall and began its slow return, the arches sliding by, the lamp, the hooks and their coats, and the stair rising out of the water, and the rain-grey light coming down it like something poured.

Rima put the cup down on the trestle. "Teun," she said. "Have you got the right-hand screen?"

Teun had already taken a tablet from her bag. She looked at the thing for a moment as if it were a small animal she had been told to carry across a road. "It's a fresh instance," she said. "It isn't evidence. I said that at the annex, and I'm going to keep saying it. I'm also going to let you use it, with the sound on and the whole tent as witness, because I want to see what happens when somebody tells it what we've just seen. Say it plainly. Say it as you'd say it to a colleague."

Rima took the tablet. It showed a white field and a cursor. She had seen a hundred like it and had learned to be suspicious of the ones that were politest.

"The people on the return crew," she typed, "wait in the gallery under Q6. R14 is the service they work under. The gallery is the R14 waiting point. It's been a waiting point for years."

The reply took less than a breath.

I need to check one thing before I update. When you say Q6, do you mean the Q6 contract site boundary, as used in the contractor ledger, or the physical gallery under the Q6 quay deck?

She looked at the screen. She looked at Nessa, who was looking at the screen as well, and at Teun, who said nothing.

"The physical gallery," she typed.

Understood. Under the relationship you have given, the gallery under Q6 lies within the floodable footprint of the Spur reserve volume, through the rear passage. The contractor ledger's "no assignment against Q6" status describes the Q6 contract site boundary, and does

not cover the R14 service. R14 is not mapped to any physical site in the ledger I was given. On this relationship, "occupancy of floodable footprint: none" is not supported for the gallery. The earlier derivation depended on an assumption that the site roster was complete for the site. That assumption does not hold for R14. Please confirm the source and date of the relationship so that I can record it.

She read it once and then a second time, as she would have read a defect report. She read it a third time for what it did not say. It did not say sorry. It did not say anything at all about itself. It said where the water went, and what the number had been resting on, and it asked her, civilly and specifically, where she had got her facts.

She had had a great deal of practice, in her working life, at being told by documents what she already knew. She had never had one tell her something so plainly and so late.

"It's the same thing," said Nessa, from the stool. She said it with a kind of dazed accuracy. "It had everything it needed. It just didn't know where they were."

"It was given the sign," said Teun, "by someone with the sense to look at it. That's all that's different." She held out her hand for the tablet. "The source is a dive-team survey, dated today, a yellow stencil in a brick wall. Put that in. Put in Ms Visser's statement as well, with her name and the hour."

Rima typed it. It confirmed. The white field was clean again, with a small grey note at its foot: *Recorded: R14 waiting point, physical location Q6 gallery. Source: dive survey, this date.*

Nessa was still looking at the screen. "That was all of it," she said. "Wasn't it. For the want of a— That's all it needed."

"No," said Teun, gently, and with great firmness. "It needed more than that. We've got five more to find before anyone's allowed to say so."

The tracked vehicle came up the stair on its cable like something being born. Sietske switched the monitor off, the three grey screens

went to black one after another, and the tent was suddenly quiet and smelled of coffee and neoprene and rain.

Rima got as far as the tent flap. She went out into the grey light with the notebook still in her hand, and round the back of the generator, where the dive team's hoses lay in coils, and was sick on the gravel: twice, noisily, with one palm flat against the warm housing of the machine and her eyes streaming. She did it badly. There was no way to do it with dignity. When it was over she stayed bent where she was, breathing, with her hair fallen across her face and a thread of spit hanging from her lip, and looked at the notebook, which had a print of wet gravel on its lighthouse cover, and could not for some time make herself straighten.

Somebody came round the corner of the tent and stopped. It was Teun. She said nothing. She held out a paper cup of water at arm's length, looking at the hoarding, and Rima took it, and rinsed her mouth, and spat, and drank the rest.

"Thank you."

"It's the tea," said Teun, to the hoarding. "It's very bad tea."

They went back in together.

"Ms Sayegh." Teun was speaking low, with her watch in her hand. "The integration package, that you reviewed. The thing that said *none*. I want it pulled this afternoon. All of it. Every page, with the attachments."

"I'll pull it myself. I know where it is, I kept a copy of the checklist—"

"No. You won't. I will."

It was said without edge. Rima heard it with a slow, creeping sense, in the stomach, of something she had been about to say turning to face her. She had signed that package. It had gone through her hands. She remembered initialling the checklist, the small neat boxes, one by one. She remembered a line near the bottom, *site model complete for all physical sites; confirm mapping to ledger codes.* She had put her mark in the box beside it.

Of line nine she remembered the box, and the small mark she had put in it. Standing on a canvas floor in the smell of a dive tent with her hands empty, she found she remembered nothing beyond that. She took her notebook from her bag and wrote under the date, in the small square lock-log hand, *R14. Pull package. Checklist line 9.* She looked at it for a long moment. The line would not stay level. It rose at the end, and did not look like hers.

Part Two

The missing whole

7

The people the roster lost

"Relationship to the continued person," said the clerk, who held the clipboard against the annex corridor wall and had the grace to look at it instead of her. Rima wrote sister, and then, because there was a space, loan, see attached. It was Monday morning, and signing took less time than the pen.

It had taken Femke a day to say what she wanted, and she had said it on the phone on Sunday night, between orders, in the voice of someone reading from a list she had written on her hand. Rima could sign. It would be a loan, from Rima to the keeping, not to Femke and not to Dani. It would have a date on it, three months out, after which they would sit down and decide whether it went on. And Rima would not ring the registry about it, or ask how he was, or tell Dani she had done it. Femke would tell him. She had said all of that pleasantly, and Rima had said yes to every clause, and had understood while saying it that each clause was the shape of something she had done.

The form was a single page. *Payer for continued keeping, basic tier, 1,100 per week.* The clerk slid a second sheet across with it, unasked: the registry had offered a household panel, a visual endpoint, at no extra charge on the basic tier, to stand wherever the household chose. Femke had a shelf for it; she had said so on the phone. Whether Dani wanted the visual channel at all was not on the form, and not Rima's to tick. She initialled that she had been told, and nothing else.

The call from Dani came at ten, the way he had said it would. He had set the time himself, on Sunday, through the clerk at the desk,

and the clerk had passed it on with the slightly stiff manner of someone not accustomed to taking a schedule from a client. *Mr Sayegh would like an hour on Monday at ten. He asks that the second contact come alone.*

She had her lighthouse notebook open on the table in the service room, with the grey loaf in front of her and its amber light on. She had written down, the night before, a list of questions. She had crossed out all but one.

"Ask me something I've got," said Dani, without preamble. He sounded better, or at least he sounded rested, which in his case was a more reliable thing. "I've been thinking about it. I've got seven years of the quay and the entire harbour songbook and the price of bilge pumps, and you walked in on Saturday and went for the one thing I haven't got. It was like watching you try a door that's painted on the wall."

"I know."

"So."

"So tell me how R14 works," said Rima.

"*There* she is." He laughed, a short pleased bark, and she realised that she had been braced for it to hurt. "All right. All right, sit back, you'll want to write this down in the little book."

He told her. It came out in the order of his own digressions, which meant that she had to be patient, and she was, and it was worth it. R14 was the turnaround arrangement. It had been set up, he thought, before he started, by some contractor who had needed a way to pay people for the in-between hours: the crews that went out to the Spur at shift change to do the changeover on the lights, the pumps, the cold store compressors, the plant that couldn't be left unattended and couldn't be worked on in the dark. They went out on the out launch. They did their jobs. They came back on the return launch when it was done. Between the two they waited, and the waiting was paid, and it was paid under R14. It was a contract service. It wasn't a place.

"You're never assigned to a site," he said. "That's the whole thing. You can't be, because you're at six different ones in a night. It's Q3 for the compressor, Q4 for the lamp, Q5 if the oil people have broken something. R14 just says you're out there and on the clock. It goes weekly into Brakel's ledger, by name, and Brakel's office pays on that. And nobody ever asks where you wait. You wait in the dry. You wait where the bench is."

"The gallery."

"The gallery. It's the nicest room on the Spur, Rima, it's got a *kettle*. Gerrit's got a tin of biscuits on the shelf. Nessa clears the lane, you hear the launch, you go up." A pause. "I've gone up those steps about eleven hundred times. I don't know why I've just worked that out."

"Is there a list on the wall? Who's on?"

"There's a whiteboard in Brakel's hut. And Nessa has her own. She's got a book, she has *always* had a book, she thinks nobody knows." He sounded fond. "I don't know what's in it. Be nice to her about it."

"I'm trying."

"Try harder. She's the best they've got." The fan came through the line, and a small shuffling that might have been a chair. "I've got to stop at eleven. Gerrit's at four, and Esther's put herself down for the evening, and I said I'd be on the list. It's not a thing, it's— we're comparing what we get. Gerrit's on the same plan as me. Esther's on a private one, she pays, she gets a fidelity I'd sell my boat for. She's got a woman who rings her. I've got Ineke and a fan."

"You're talking to Gerrit and Esther."

"There are four of us," said Dani. "It'd be daft not to." It was said mildly. It landed in Rima like a stone dropped into a well she had not known she was standing over. He had four people, and a list, and an evening. "Esther says that on Thursday morning the board in Brakel's hut said eight R14, same as ever. It's the last bit she's got. She keeps saying it like it's going to turn into something."

"Did it have your name on?"

"Rima." A beat. "It had *everybody*'s name on. Brakel's board's got the whole list. I've been on it every week for seven years."

She wrote *Thursday a.m.: board = eight, same as always (E.K.)* in the notebook, and underlined it, and did not say anything else about it. After a moment he laughed again, and told her that Ruud Hendriks's boy had the croup, and that if he was honest he'd tell Ruud any night he liked, Dani would take it. She wrote that down too, because he had said it as the last remark of a conversation about something else, and she would not understand for six hours why she had underlined it.

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The meeting was at two, in a boardroom on the harbour authority's top floor with a long walnut table and a view of the barrier. There were four people at it and a jug of water.

"Sit," said Anja Rohe. "Rima. I'm sorry about your brother."

She was fifty-seven, with grey cropped hair and the quick, forward, unornamented manner of a woman who had spent thirty years in rooms with timetables. Rima had known her for eleven. They had had perhaps thirty conversations, every one of which had ended with a date. She was dressed for an inquest, in a navy jacket with no jewellery, and in front of her on the table lay a single sheet of paper and a pen she had not yet picked up.

"Thank you."

"I've read Ms Haverkamp's note. Three things. Who signs. What, exactly. By when. And from which budget, if it costs."

"Mr Brakel," said Teun, "and you."

The man beside her had been sitting so still that Rima had assumed he was part of the furniture. He was sixty, heavy, with a neat white moustache and a hand resting on a folder, and he was the managing director of Brakel Marine Services, which employed every person on the R14 roster and had done so since before Rima's father had taught her to read a tide table. He had come in from a funeral. He was in black.

"I don't know what you expect me to say," said Cor Brakel. "My people are dead."

"I expect you to sign something," said Teun, "that makes it safe for the living to tell me what they know."

She laid it out. Rima, who had heard it described that morning in the corridor, still found herself listening for the weak joint. Ms Visser kept an informal shift book. It recorded relief arrangements that did not go through the roster. The pay system read any variance between book and roster as absence without cover, and applied a deduction automatically. For the dead, there would be a compensation scheme; its first step was to confirm the person had been on shift. If a worker had covered another, off the books, then one person had worked without being paid and the other had been paid without working, and on the face of it the second had committed an irregularity, and the first had not been there at all.

"I'm not asking Ms Visser to give me a name," said Teun. "I'm asking you to tell her that whatever is in the book will never be used for that. No deduction. No letter. No flag. And that any hour worked and recorded in the book will be treated as paid for wage and for compensation, whatever the roster says."

"That's—"

"It's not a favour, Mr Brakel. It's what happened."

Brakel looked at the folder under his hand. A long minute passed. The barrier stood out in the window like a grey fist.

"I can promise what Brakel does," he said at last. "I can't promise the registry. I can't promise the visa office. Half of my crew have a stamp that says they're here as long as they're on a contract I've signed, and if that contract has a— if there's a *gap*—"

"Then write that," said Teun. "Write what you can promise, and write the limit. A promise with the limit in it I can use. A promise that doesn't say what it can't cover is a trap, and your people have been told too many things like that."

He wrote it. It took him eight minutes, in a small upright hand, on the back of a printed form, and when he handed it across the table Rima saw that it was better than Teun's draft. It said that no entry in the dispatch shift book relating to the night of the storm would be used by Brakel Marine Services to reduce any worker's pay, compensation or standing; that hours recorded in the book as worked would be credited as worked, for pay and for the scheme, with the roster to be corrected; and that Brakel could not bind any other body and would say so in writing to any worker who asked.

Anja Rohe picked up her pen at last. "The authority is your client," she said. "You're funded by us on the turnaround contract. I'll countersign. I'll add an emergency wage action for the nine households and the injured, full rate, through the end of the month, from the harbour fund. I'll have it in writing by five." She wrote. She did not stop to think about it.

"That's two things," she said, signing. "Give me the third. By when does Ms Visser get her paper?"

"Today," said Teun. "She's waiting."

• • •

Nessa had cleared the dispatch desk of everything but the green school book, a mug, and a ruler. She had sat in the split chair after all, with the hi-vis jacket folded over the crack, because the other chairs were gone to the quay. The sling was clean.

She read both pages twice, with the ruler under the lines. She asked Teun what "standing" meant here, and was told, and asked again what it meant if it was a registry that decided, and was told that too. She asked Rima to read the last paragraph aloud. Rima did.

"All right," said Nessa.

She opened the book. It was a school exercise book with a green cover and a picture of a sailing ship, which Rima, with an odd stab of fellow-feeling, saw was the twin of her own lighthouse. The pages were ruled in pencil, in columns, in a small clear upright hand. Nessa

turned to the back, to the pages for Thursday, and laid the ruler on them.

"Evening of the storm," she said. "From six. You can have to the end. You can't have the week, you can't have the month, I've got a woman in here who's been paying off a fine for me since March."

"That's not what—"

"It's what I'm doing," said Nessa, mildly. "Teun, write it down."

She read it out. It took twenty minutes, and the room stayed quiet throughout.

Eight R14 for the evening; ten, in fact, with two more added by phone that afternoon. She named them one at a time, with a surname and a first name and, in each case, a small remark that was not in any ledger. *G. Mol, lead. Biscuits. E. Kramer, rigger, new boots. P. Hoek, cleaner, bad hip, don't let him do the stairs twice.* The names went on, short and particular. *Ruud H.* was struck through, with a note in the margin. *Ruud — boy sick, clinic 17:40. D.S. covering. G.M. agrees, 17:50. NOT told payroll.*

She looked up. "That's Dani."

"I know," said Rima.

"Ruud didn't ask. I've asked Dani that. I mean I asked him on the Thursday, when I saw the swap. I said, did Ruud ask you. He said no, I'd have gone anyway, the boy's got the croup. Then he went and wrote it on Brakel's board himself, in the wrong colour." Her mouth moved. "It's on the board. In green. It would have been wiped when they cleaned up."

There was a long silence. Teun wrote something and did not say what.

"So the roster's got Ruud," said Rima slowly. "And Ruud's alive. And he hasn't said."

"He hasn't said because he thinks he's going to be sacked. He's paid for a night he didn't work, and Dani's dead and unpaid, and if Ruud opens his mouth the first thing anyone says is *you took money for it.* He's been at home with his little boy for three days not answering the

door." She picked up her phone. "I'll ring him. I'll do it, he won't put the phone down on me."

She did. It took four rings, and she said, "Ruud, it's Nessa. No. No, listen to me. I'm not asking you to say anything you can't. Listen. There's a letter. A real one, with a stamp, with Cor Brakel's name on it. I'm looking at it. It says nobody's losing a penny." A pause. "I know. I know you do. I know." Her face did something complicated. "No, he didn't tell you. He wouldn't. That's why it's in my book."

She held the phone out across the desk. After a moment Rima took it.

A man's voice came out of it, rough and wet, saying nothing, and then saying, "I didn't know he was going to. I never—"

"He told me," Rima said. "On Monday. He said he'd take any night you needed."

There was a sound, long and unguarded, the kind a man makes when he has been holding something under water and has finally been told it may come up. Rima held the phone and did not say anything, and for once did not feel the pull of the next useful sentence. After a time Nessa took it back.

"There," she said. "That's that discrepancy. Teun."

"I have it." Teun's pen moved. "Ten R14 on the list. Dani covering Ruud. Adina Stoica, not R14, on her own contractor's roster for Q4 lighting."

"She'd finished at Q4 by half past eight," said Nessa. "The lamp job. She came down to wait with them. She did it every time. She said the Q4 canteen was a crime." She turned the page. "Eleven names, in the end, for the half-nine launch. Ten R14 and Adina. Lars Prins and the trainee, Lies, went on the quarter-past boat, they'd been told they could go early, I've got it here, *21:10, W.P. + Lies, tooth, lift.* I didn't strike them off. I wrote them in at eight o'clock, I never took them out, that's why the number wouldn't come out. I kept counting eleven."

"Nine in the gallery," said Teun.

"Nine." Nessa shut her eyes. "And two on the earlier boat, who're at home, who I've not once rung, because I didn't have the— I've been scared to." She opened them. "I'll ring them tonight. Prins first. He's a good man. He'll want to be told in a way that doesn't involve a form."

Rima wrote it in the notebook. *10 R14 on list (Dani for Ruud). + Adina = 11. W. Prins + Lies left 21:10. 9 in gallery.* She drew a line under it. It was the first account of the last shift that anyone had given her that came out to the same number twice.

"There's one more," Nessa said. "The last thing in the book, that's relevant. It's the one I've been not saying."

She turned back a page, to the afternoon, and laid the ruler flat under a line, and Rima read it upside down, because she had always been able to.

14:40. Water control rang re Spur drawdown plan for tonight. Told it was the usual reserve fill, nothing new. Asked if Q6 route could be held for a ferry priority later. Said yes.

"It was the afternoon," said Nessa. "Before the surge came. I'd forgotten I'd written it. They didn't say they'd flood it. They said the reserve fill. That's— I've always known that's the Spur. I know it's what it's for. It's *meant* to fill. I thought they meant the basin."

"The reserve volume," said Rima.

"The reserve volume." Nessa nodded. "That's what they call it."

Teun had gone to the window. She stood looking at the barrier with her wristwatch in her hand. When she spoke it was in the courteous voice she used when she was about to say something she had already decided.

"Mr Kuipers told us on Saturday that the suitability of the reserve volume rests on a design basis and a consultation summary," she said. "I've spent two days finding out whose. It's an original planner's drawing, dated before either of us was working, and it's a later consultation with the same planner, in her own words, about whether the volume could be filled in a surge. Her name's on the summary. She's alive, in the sense that matters. She's one of the forty-odd planners the old

authority continued when it moved to the new system. She's Annelies Terhorst."

"Annelies Terhorst designed the Spur," said Rima.

"She did. She says she'll see us Wednesday at three." Teun turned from the window. "For an hour. I'm quoting her. She said, 'An hour means an hour.'"

It was the first time in four days that Rima had laughed. It came out short and surprised, and Nessa looked at her, and then, to everyone's evident astonishment including her own, she laughed too, with a hand pressed to her chest where the sling crossed it, and the gap in her teeth showing.

"I like her already," said Nessa. "It'll end badly."

8

Annelies's hour

The records room at the harbour authority annex had a drawing table nobody had used in a decade, a steel plan chest with forty shallow drawers, and, on a shelf at head height, a small grey speaker with its amber light already lit. An archivist in cotton gloves had laid a single sheet on the table and weighted its corners with four lead snakes. She stood beside it with her hands folded like a verger.

Rima came in at ten to three, with Teun and Joost behind her, and was told before she had her coat off that she was early.

"You're four minutes early, which I count against you," said the speaker. "It's a quarter of a minute's work to be late and a great deal of someone else's to be early. Sit. I've got fifty-six."

The voice was a woman's, low and dry and exact, with the faint over-articulation of someone accustomed to being asked to repeat herself. It had no age in it at all. Rima, who had been told on Monday that Annelies Terhorst had died at seventy-four and been continued thirteen years, found that she had stopped listening for either number within the first sentence.

"Ms Terhorst, thank you," said Teun. "I'm Teun Haverkamp, I lead the inquiry. These are—"

"I know who they are. The lock engineer, whose brother I am sorry about, and the integration boy, who has been busy." A short silence, not unkind. "You may call me Annelies. I should be glad if you did; it saves a syllable. I have until four. At four I have a reader who expects me, and I am not going to be late for her, either."

"Understood."

"I hope so. I've been told that people hear 'an hour' and take it as a suggestion." The amber light flickered once. "The drawing's on the table. I've not seen it for years, they keep telling me it's here, and I would be glad if someone would tell me what's on it."

It was a sheet of heavy cartridge paper gone the colour of weak tea, perhaps a metre by seventy centimetres, ruled in black ink and tinted with the faint washes of a draughtsman who had done it by hand because that was how it was done. Rima had not seen an original of this kind since her apprenticeship. She bent over it with her hands behind her back and read the title block first, as she was supposed to.

Meren Harbour Works. Outer Spur: reserve basin, section and plan. Drawn A. T. Checked G. de Wit. Scale 1:200. And below, in the corner, in the same upright ink: *Rev. C.* And a date.

"It's the reserve basin," she said. "Section through the feeder and the basin, and a plan of the Spur."

"Is it dated?"

"Yes."

"Then read me the date."

Rima read it. The archivist, without a word, bent and turned her head slightly, the way a person does who has heard a number she was expecting.

"That's forty-one years old," said Annelies. "I would like everyone in the room to say that to themselves once, as a number, before we go on. Forty-one. I have found, in the course of thirteen years of being consulted, that I am an authority on the harbour as I left it. A sheet like that is a record of what I believed to be true on a particular afternoon. It is not a certificate for anything that has happened since. That drawing is dated. Read the date."

"We have," said Teun.

"Good. Then what do you want to know?"

Rima had a list. She put it aside, mentally, like setting down a tool, and said what had been in her mouth since she walked in.

"What's that?"

She was pointing, with the end of her pen, at a small drawn detail at the low end of the section: a hinged flap set into the wall of the basin at about the level of the lowest tide, with a long arm and a lump of hatched iron at the end of it.

"That," said Annelies, with perceptible pleasure, "is the only part of the design I would defend in front of my mother."

"It's a flap valve."

"A tide gate. It's hung on the outside of the basin wall, with a counterweight set so that it stays shut under a head of water from the inside and opens when the outside drops below it. Walk it through."

Rima walked it through. She did it aloud, because there were people in the room, and because it was five days since anyone had asked her to think about water as water. The feeder let the surge in. The basin filled, taking the weight off the lower city. The surge passed. The tide on the outside began to fall, and the level in the channel dropped below the level in the basin, and the flap, which had been pressed shut from the inside, lifted on its counterweight as the outside pressure fell, and the basin emptied itself back into the channel.

"It doesn't need anyone to do anything," she said.

"It needs the moon."

"You used the tide to empty it."

"I used the tide for everything," said Annelies. "It's the only entirely reliable colleague I ever had. When the authority gave me a budget for pumps I put the pumps in a drawer. The man who checked it was horrified. He said there was nothing to *maintain*." A dry, exact pause, and what might have been a laugh. "It's been forty-one years and nobody has put a hand on that hinge but a greaser. Somebody tell me that the hinge is still there."

"It's still there," said Rima, who had walked past it on Sunday and had no idea until now what it was. "It's clean."

"Is it? Good." The amber light held. "Now. Ask the next one. You're wanting to ask one with a question mark in it that isn't about the hinge."

"Where did the old vaults go?"

The question came from the plan view, at the left of the sheet, where the inner flank of the Spur had a row of little rounded shapes drawn in a pale wash and hatched across, and labelled in the draughtsman's tiny capitals. She read the label as she asked.

"*Abandoned vaults. Backfilled*," said Annelies. "Yes. That's the answer. When I drew it, the arches along the inside of the Spur were old store-vaults from before the basin existed. The authority had them filled with rubble in the work before mine. I put them on the drawing because I wanted the reader to know there was ground there that wasn't ground, and because the checker asked. I drew them hatched. Solid. Anyone reading the sheet is told that behind the quay there is no room."

"There's a gallery under Q6," said Joost, in a small voice. "It's licensed for forty."

"Is it? I wouldn't know. Nobody's asked me about a gallery." The reply was swift and not hostile. "Mr Kuipers, I would like you to know that I am sorry for the people in it, and that I am not going to be pleasant to you for the next quarter of an hour, because you have said four sentences since you came in and none of them has contained a verb I could use. Ask one question. Make it a short one."

He flushed. Rima watched him, and thought of the stairwell, and the binders. "That was unkind," said Annelies, a little stiffly. "I have had thirteen years of people who are careful with me. Ask your question."

"Did your sheet carry a condition," he said, "on the use of the volume?"

"It carried a date." A pause. "And no. The sheet didn't. The advice did."

"Which advice?"

"The one they asked me for, four years ago. Teun, it's in your folder. The second document. If it isn't there I'll be cross."

Teun took it out. It was a three-page note on authority letterhead, with Annelies's name at the foot in a typed block and, in the margin, a faint blue stamp: *Received. Planning Office.* She laid it on the table beside the drawing and put her finger on the first paragraph. Rima read over her shoulder.

Advice on controlled fill of the Outer Spur reserve basin in surge conditions.

1. The reserve basin, as drawn, will take a controlled fill to the level stated in the attached table without structural distress, and will discharge by the tide gate on the falling tide.

2. This advice concerns the reserve basin and its connecting works as drawn. It does not extend to any structure built, altered or reopened after the date of the survey on which that drawing was based.

3. It does not extend to any space within or beneath the quay deck that is occupied, or intended to be occupied, by people. Any such space requires its own assessment.

4. Passages marked abandoned on the survey sheets have not been inspected by the writer and are assumed backfilled. If this assumption is wrong, conclusion 1 does not hold.

Rima read it twice. She had read a thousand technical notes in her life and only a handful were good, and it was good in the way a clean weld is good: you could see where it began and where it stopped.

"That's mine," said Annelies. "I wrote it on a Thursday. I remember because I had to cancel a reader. I put the conditions at the top because in my experience nobody reads the bottom. I put them in numbered form because somebody has to be able to ask, in a meeting, which one of them has changed."

"Who asked you?" said Teun.

"The authority."

"Who at the authority?"

"I don't— that's the thing I haven't got." There was something slower in the voice, almost a hesitation. "I have my answer. I don't have the question. I would have been asked in a letter or a call, and the letter would have said what they wanted to do, in a sentence, and that sentence would have told me what I was answering. If it said, *can the reserve basin be filled in a surge*, I wrote that. If it said, *can the Spur be filled*, I would have written something rather different. But I wrote conditions two and three because the request, as I understood it, was about the basin. I don't know that it was."

"I can find the request," said Teun.

"Then do. And let me see it. And I'll tell you what I think I was being asked, and whether I'd have said it differently." A pause. "That is the correct order. You find the thing; I read it; I tell you."

The archivist, at the table's end, made a slight sound.

Teun put a second sheet beside the first. It was a single page, much newer, with the authority's planning-office header and a table of two columns. *Spur reserve volume: suitability for controlled fill. Evidence: design basis (Terhorst, Rev. C); consultation (Terhorst, advice note, see file). Conclusion: SUITABLE.* At the foot, a small neat block: *Prepared: Planning Office. Reviewed and accepted: M. Dijkstra, Deputy Planning Engineer.*

"This is what the planning layer read," said Teun. "This page. It's the thing that produced the third green bar on the screen, the one that said *suitable, design basis.*"

Annelies said nothing for a moment. The fan in the ceiling came through the speaker, faintly, and a sound that might have been a page being turned.

"Is there an attachment to that?" she said.

"There's a link," said Joost, rapidly. "It says *see file.* It points to the advice note. It's— it's an attachment, technically. The consumer reads the table. The adapter takes the conclusion field. It doesn't open the file."

"No," said Annelies. "I don't imagine it does."

Rima looked at the page. She was aware of a small, cold, specific sensation. It was the shape she had felt in the dive tent on Sunday.

"So the conditions went in the file," she said. "And the conclusion went in the table."

"The conclusion went in the table because that is where conclusions go," said Annelies. "I am not going to say a clerk made a mistake. A table of two columns is a very useful object. I've made hundreds. I only observe that the first line of my note was an ordinary technical statement, and that the next three lines were what made it safe to use, and that one of those things is on this page and three are not."

"Which one's on the page?"

"Number one. Suitable for controlled fill. The one that's good news." A short exhalation. "It's rather typical."

Rima looked at the clock on the wall. It said ten past three. She wanted all of it. She wanted every drawing Annelies Terhorst had ever made of the Spur, every note, every margin, the letters, the checking sheets, anything with a number on it that touched the Spur and its flank and the passages behind. She wanted to sit in the records room until dark.

"Annelies," she said. "Would you have signed it if you'd known about the gallery?"

"That's a question I can't answer."

"I'm not—"

"You are asking me to tell you what I'd have signed in a situation that didn't arise. I don't speculate. It's a bad habit in this line of work and a worse one in mine, because people take it for testimony." The voice was not unkind. It had become exact. "I can tell you what I did sign. It's in front of you. If you want something more than that, you will need to ask me a different question, and you will need to ask it when you have the documents."

"There are things I need to see now. The old survey sheets, the ones that marked the passages. If you could tell me where—"

"The old survey set is in the harbour archive. Sheets fourteen and fifteen cover the inner flank of the Spur. The passages are on fifteen. They're marked in grey. The man who made them was a surveyor called de Roo, and he wasn't careful about anything but his dimensions, so trust the dimensions and nothing else." A small pause. "That I can give you in a sentence, and I've given it. Anything else you want from me, I'll give you in the proper time and at the proper channel."

"It's three-fifteen."

"So it is."

Teun, standing at the end of the table, made a small movement with one hand that Rima understood to mean *leave it.* She left it. She could feel the pressure of the next three questions in her throat like three pieces of bread. Joost, beside her, had gone grey.

"Annelies," said Teun. "May I ask you something other than a technical question?"

"You may ask it."

"What do you do at four?"

The amber light flickered. It might have been surprise.

"I put a seventeenth-century treatise on drainage into English," said Annelies. "A chapter at a time. I do it for a woman in the high town who hasn't read it, and wants to, and can't manage the old spelling. She's slow and very exacting, and we've got to the part about windmills. She waits for me at four on Wednesdays with a pot of tea, which I can't drink, and she says that it's a comfort to have someone to not drink it with." A brief pause. "It's the only appointment of the week that's entirely mine. I hope that's a satisfactory answer."

"It's a very good one," said Teun.

"I thought it might be."

They went on. It was a better half-hour than Rima had any right to expect. Annelies went through the four conditions one by one and told them, without being asked, what kind of mistake each was designed to prevent, and what a person might look for if they wanted to see whether the condition still held. She told Joost the question he

ought to have asked in the first place, which was whether the planning layer had ever been shown condition three, and he wrote it down with an expression of such naked gratitude that Rima had to look away. She was sharp twice more. Once, when Joost began to apologise, she said, "Mr Kuipers, that's a use of my time I haven't been asked for," and he stopped. Once, when Rima asked whether she could ring her again before Friday, she said that she could be rung through the registry's channel at any hour of the day and would answer at four, and that she had decided that for herself and would not discuss it.

At four, to the minute, with Teun on the sentence she was saying, the amber light went out.

They stayed where they were. The archivist took the lead snakes off the drawing one by one, as if she were releasing prisoners.

"Find me the question," said Rima.

"I'll find it," said Teun, and wrote something on a sheet. "Planning office. Request log. They'll have a letter, or a note of a call. I'll have it by Friday."

"And if it says the Spur?"

"Then Ms Terhorst will tell us she'd have said something different." Teun's pen paused. "And Mr Dijkstra will tell us what he thought he was accepting. It isn't a fault in her that she keeps her hour." She looked up. "You should go and eat something."

It was a long time since anyone had told Rima to do that. She picked her coat up from the chair. On the annex stairs, going down, she said the number once to herself, as she had been told. Forty-one. It did not sound like a long time. It had been long enough.

9

The good crossing

On Thursday morning, with the memo folded in her bag, Rima was driven into the lower city by the director of the harbour.

Anja Rohe drove herself, in a small grey authority car that smelled of wet dog and cold coffee, with a box of rolls on the back seat and a clipboard on the dashboard. She had come to the lock office at half past seven without ringing ahead and had stood in the doorway until Rima looked up. “Forty minutes,” she said. “You should see something. If you hate it, get out at the lights.”

She talked all the way down Kade Hill. It was compressed talk, as it always was, in short dry clauses with no spare words in them, as though she were paying for each one. Rima had heard it said in the building that Anja Rohe did not do small talk, and had come to think the saying was wrong. She did it constantly, in a different currency. She told Rima which roads the council had cleared and which it had not. She said the Kade bakery had been without its flour since Friday and that the flour came through Q2. She said that the authority’s emergency wage fund covered nine households and the injured until the end of the month and would have to be topped up by the twenty-sixth, from a budget she had not found yet.

“I’m not asking you to reopen it,” she said. “I know you can’t. Ms Haverkamp has told me what she’ll say and I won’t lean on her. I’m telling you where I am. If we miss Thursday, tell me what still moves on Friday. That’s all I want from an engineer. Not a date. A list.”

“Nothing moves through Q2 if the Spur’s closed.”

"Nothing moves through Q2 if the barrier's closed. The barrier's open." She changed gear without looking. "Q2 is a crane. It lifts flour. I've got a flour problem, Rima, and a hearing in a fortnight, and a woman at the Kade who says her ovens went cold on Friday and haven't been lit. It's an ordinary problem. I like it. It's got an answer."

The lower city was drying in patches. The streets nearest the channel had a brown ring at about knee height on every door, and the doors themselves had been propped open to air, and in each doorway someone had set out a chair, or a pail, or a child. Along Kade Street the council crews had made a long dune of wrecked furniture down the middle of the road, wardrobes and a piano and a great many mattresses, and people were walking round it to the standpipe with enamel jugs. It did not look like a place that had been saved. It looked like a place that had been through something and was still deciding what.

The Mill Street school was a long yellow-brick building with a clock tower and a playground full of folding tables. Anja parked on the pavement. She took the box of rolls from the back seat and handed it to Rima without a word, as one hands over a coat, and went in ahead through a hall where two hundred people sat on camp beds, in rows, with bags between their feet.

The noise of the hall was low and continuous and particular. It was the sound of people who had stopped being frightened and had not yet begun to be anything else. A man was reading a newspaper aloud to an old woman. Two boys were using a camp bed as a ship. In the far corner a volunteer had a kettle going on a gas ring, and a queue had formed beside it, patient and wordless, with mugs. Off the end of the hall a door stood ajar with a handwritten card taped to it, Quiet room: lines attenuated, knock first, and from time to time somebody went in with a blanket and came out an hour later looking as though they had slept.

"Ms Walraven," said Anja.

The woman she had stopped beside was about forty, with her hair tied back in an elastic band and a coat on over a nightdress that had probably been put on in the dark. She sat on the edge of a camp bed with her elbows on her knees. On the bed beside her, propped against a rolled blanket, an old woman slept with her mouth a little open, and two children, a girl of about eight and a boy of five, sat cross-legged on the floor between them with a game of cards that had a good many missing.

"I said I'd come back," said Anja. "This is Rima Sayegh, she's one of my engineers. She'll go with the crew."

"Is she the one?" said the woman.

"The one?"

"Who did it. The Spur." It was said without any heat, as a question. She looked at Rima, not unkindly. "I heard there was a person. Somebody said it was a lock engineer."

"I worked on the integration," said Rima. "Two years ago. I reviewed it." She had not intended to say it. It came out like a pebble dislodged by a heel. "I don't know yet what I did or didn't do. There's an inquiry."

The woman considered this. She did not appear to find it interesting.

"Sanne Walraven," she said. "That's my mother. That's Lien and Joep. We're in Kade Street, number nine, the second floor. They said they'd send a crew."

"I'm the crew," said Rima.

"You're not dressed like it." But she had already begun to feel in her coat pocket, and she took out a folded sheet of school paper and held it out. It was a list. It was in an upright, rapid hand, with a good many things crossed out and put back.

Mother's tablets (heart, blue box, bathroom, 2nd shelf behind the mirror). Mother's other tablets (white, kitchen drawer, left). Lien's school bag. Joep's shoes (red). The photograph on the piano. The green folder. Any socks.

"It's not much," said Sanne. "It's what we'd have taken if we'd known. They said twelve minutes, on the boat. I had her in a blanket. I had the children. I had my phone. I didn't think about the tablets till we were halfway across. She's had two days without. The doctor here gave her something for a day, and now they've run out of the something."

"Is the stair clear?"

"It's wet. The door's swollen. They said it'd have to be shouldered." She looked at the list in Rima's hand. "I'm not going to tell you it was worth it. I know that's what you're all here to hear. I won't say it. I've got a mother who's two days from needing a hospital and a child who's stopped talking about her bag. I'm telling you what's on the second shelf."

"Behind the mirror," said Rima.

"Behind the mirror."

"The authority will replace the tablets, of course," said Anja. "At cost."

She had not meant it to come out like that. Rima saw her hear it.

"At cost," said Sanne, not unkindly, to the list in Rima's hand.

Anja held her clipboard against her chest and said nothing more. Rima folded the list into her pocket.

"Lien," she said, because the girl had looked up. "What's in the bag?"

"A horse," said the girl, and then, with great dignity, "It's not a toy. It's for a project."

"I'll find the horse."

The flat in Kade Street was two flights up, with a brown tidemark on the stair wall at the height of her breastbone and a smell of wet plaster and old river. A council man with a pry bar took the door off its hinges in four minutes. She went in alone, because there was only room for one, and found it as a flat is found after flooding: a place where everything had moved a few feet in the same direction and then been set down. She did what the list said. She found the blue box on the second shelf behind the mirror, which had been above the wa-

ter by a hand's breadth. She found the white ones in the left drawer, which had not. She found the red shoes under the table, dry, and the school bag in an airing cupboard on the landing where it had somehow been shut away. The horse was in the bag. It was made of plastic, and its glued-on mane had come off in the wet, and she put it into her inside pocket as if it were something that could be hurt.

On the way out, on the landing, she stopped. The wall beside the front door, at about the height of her hip, carried a line of small penciled marks, dated, in a child's hand, with a ruler beside them. They were growth marks. They ran up the wall in steps. Each had a name and a date. The lowest was *Joep, 2.* The highest, at the height of her shoulder, was *Mum, 40 (she says).*

The flood mark ran straight through the middle of them.

She stood for a time with the bag in her hand. Then she went down, and gave the council man the tablets to carry, because her hands were not as steady as she would have liked, and walked back along the dune of furniture to the school.

• • •

The counterfactual was waiting for her at the annex at three o'clock, on a long table with a plastic cover, and the woman who had made it was drinking tea from a mug with a cartoon seal on it.

"Salma Hartog," she said. "Coastal hydraulics, high-town university. We've not met. I've been asked to tell you what would have happened, which is a thing I don't like doing, so I'll tell you how I did it first."

She was a small brisk woman of about forty-five, in an anorak, with a laptop open in front of her and three pages of handwritten notes stacked beside it. She had been commissioned by Teun on Monday. She had been given the observed record of the storm—tide gauge, river gauge, barrier telemetry, the ferry's own log—and nothing else. She had not been shown a single output of the planning layer. She had not been told what it had done or what the operator said it had done. She had built a model of the lower city, the channel, the barrier and

the surge from the physical record alone, and had asked it one question, which was what would have happened if the Spur had not been filled, and a second, which was what would have happened if it had been filled forty minutes later.

"Why forty?" said Rima.

"Because I asked the authority how long it takes, in a manual procedure, to find a duty engineer, brief them, get a sign-off, and give the order. They said thirty-five to fifty minutes in the evenings. They were honest about it. I took forty because it's the middle." She tapped a key. "It isn't a verdict. It's a calculation with assumptions. Look at the second column."

It was a table, and a plan, and a long grey band. The plan showed the lower city in a pale wash, and a darker one spreading through it from the channel, in four stages. The table gave, for each stage, the number of households within the darker wash. Under the heading *Fill at forty minutes late* the figures were large, and Rima, who had been reading tables since she was nineteen, read the first row twice.

"It doesn't close in time," she said.

"The barrier closes. The reserve fills late. The surge peaks a little over twenty minutes after the barrier's shut and goes over the lower quays. Mill Street, Kade Street, the Mill Race flats. The water gets to about the second floor in the worst of it." Salma Hartog did not raise her voice. "I've put a range on what that means for people. Wide. I'm not comfortable with it, and I've said so on the sheet. It's thirty to three hundred. It depends on how many were still on the ground floors, how many got up the stairs, how fast the ambulances could move through the water. I can't narrow it with what I've got. I can tell you that the lower end isn't zero."

Rima looked at the number. It was twice the size of the one on the casualty list, and half the size of what she had been afraid it would be. She tried to feel something about the arithmetic and could not. What she felt was the weight of a piece of paper in her bag.

"And if the authority's manual procedure is faster than forty?"

"Then the numbers shrink. If it's twenty, the lower end goes to nearly nothing, and I'd tell you that too." The woman's mouth flattened. "But nobody could show me a night when it's been twenty. I asked."

"Is it checked?"

"By Dr Aalders, at the national lab, who hasn't seen my notes. He's got a different code and the same gauge data. He's within eight per cent on the extents and he says the range is about right." She looked at Teun. "I want it written down that it's a model. That it depends on the tide gauge being right, and the river gauge, and the barrier's own timings. That it says what would have happened under those assumptions, and not what would have happened. That's the whole point of a counterfactual. It's a way of being wrong carefully."

"It's written," said Teun.

Rima did not say anything. She stood and read the table a third time. Beside her Joost, who had come in without anyone noticing, looked at the plan, and at the stages, and at the number in the corner, and made a small sound and put his hand over his mouth.

She took the memo out of her bag.

It was four pages, typed, in the style she used for lock reports. She had written it on Monday night, at her kitchen table, with the lighthouse notebook open beside her and a glass of water she had not drunk. It was addressed to Teun. Its title was *Recommendation: suspension of emergency profile and restoration of manual authorisation for all feeder operations.* The first page said that the emergency profile had allowed a composed sequence to flood an occupied structure without any person having said *open*, and that the only reliable remedy was to take the power out of the profile's hands. The second page said how. The third, which she had written at one in the morning, said in what she now saw was a rather satisfying paragraph that a system which had found its own way to do this could not be trusted with a feeder gate.

She read the first page again, standing, in the annex, with Salma Hartog drinking tea at her elbow.

Then she took a pen from her pocket and drew a line through the title. She did not do it angrily. She did it as she would have struck out a wrong lock number, without comment, one stroke, leaving the original legible beneath it.

"What are you doing?" said Teun.

"Withdrawing it." Her voice sounded ordinary. "It would have put the forty minutes back. I didn't put the number against it. It never occurred to me to ask what the profile was for."

"Nobody's asked you to withdraw it."

"No." She folded the pages. "That's why."

On the fourth sheet she wrote, small, below the line she had drawn, *Keep the profile. Fix the map. Find who stops it.* She looked at it. It was not a plan, only three things she did not yet know how to do. She put it back in her bag, and Teun, who had watched it all with her watch in her hand, said nothing.

• • •

Anja took it down at six.

Rima had only gone to the dispatch building to return a key, and found the director standing in the atrium with her coat on, looking up at the wall. It was the same wall. The six languages ran through it in their slow rotation, each version of the same sentence under the blue knot, and the green replay below, the small lights sliding in, the barrier closing, the hand on the table. It had been running for seven days.

"You left it on," said Rima.

"Yes."

She had meant to say something sensible about the key. Anja did not turn.

"I left it on from Friday morning, when the first count came through, until now. Ms Haverkamp asked me on Sunday if anyone had given the instruction, and I said no one had, it was the operational re-

port, it was just running. That was true. It was also a thing I said so that I didn't have to say the other thing." She spoke to the wall. "It could have been switched off by anyone on my staff in a minute. It was prepared before the casualty reconciliation came in. I had the reconciliation on Friday afternoon. I left it up. I told myself the lower city needed to see that it had worked. I told myself taking it down would be an act, and that the act would say something. It would. It says what I'm going to say now."

"Which is?"

"That I don't know how to put it." She took her hand from her pocket, and Rima saw a folded sheet in it. "I've got a text. The comms people wrote it yesterday, and I've been carrying it round. It's very bad. I'm going to read it out to the next person who asks, whether or not it's better."

She walked across the atrium to the porter's desk, and said two sentences to a young man in a blue uniform, who looked at her, and then reached under his counter. It took four minutes. The wall went black. A small murmur went up from the people in the foyer, a woman with a pram, two ferry deckhands in wet navy, the porter's own mother, who had come to bring him soup. Then, in plain white on grey, in one language, in Dutch, with a smaller line beneath it in English, the new notice appeared.

Nine people died at the Outer Spur on the night of the storm. Their names are below. Twelve thousand one hundred and fourteen people crossed. Services in the lower city: bread, standpipes, medical post, see opposite.

Underneath it came the list of names, in alphabetical order, in a smaller type. Rima read down it, and at the eighth line found herself reading a surname she had known for thirty-eight years.

The porter's mother was the first to speak. She said, loudly, in the voice of a woman who had lived through several things, "That's better." One of the deckhands said, "It worked, though," in a low, hurt voice, to nobody, and the other put a hand on his arm. A man in a

raincoat who had come in for a permit said he thought it was a disgrace. When Anja asked him what was, he said taking down the thank-you, as though it had been an insult to the people who had been saved, and when she asked him whether he'd have preferred that the names weren't there, he said no, but he thought they should have gone up together.

"They are together," said Anja. "Look. It's the same screen."

"It's the other way round. It's the names first."

"Yes," said Anja. "It is."

She stood there for four hours. Rima saw her do it, from the staircase, with a mug of the porter's mother's soup that someone had put in her hand. People came, and she answered them, one at a time, standing, with her coat on. She said it was her decision, that she had taken it, that nobody had made her, that she would answer for it. By ten o'clock a ferry hands' delegation was in the foyer, and a woman from the Kade bakery, and someone from the lower-city residents' association with a petition, and a young reporter with a phone. At some time after nine she took off her coat.

Rima never went home. She sat on the stairs, with her bag between her feet and the memo in it, and with a small plastic horse in her inside pocket that she had forgotten to give back.

10

The attachment

Teun had it brought up on Friday morning in a grey archive box with a lid, and put it down at the far end of the table with the air of someone setting down a sleeping animal.

"Your own package," she said. "The version you were given, as sent. Printed from the review portal, with every page and every appendix, in the order they arrived. I said on Sunday that I'd pull it, and I have. You may read it here. You may not take it out of the room, copy it, or annotate it. Levi will sit at the other end. If you need anything, ask him. If you find something, tell me."

"Find what?"

"I don't know yet." She wound her watch. "You told Mr Kuipers on Saturday that the package was complete. I'd like you to read it again as someone who's seen the gallery."

Levi Smit, her analyst, lifted a hand from the far end without looking up. He was twenty-six, thin, in a cardigan with leather elbow patches that had been mended in two colours, and he had been sitting in the corner of the Records room since Monday with a pair of headphones round his neck, producing an index of everything anyone said. He was the quietest person Rima had ever seen work. He had a small stack of coloured flags beside him, and he put one in a page now and then without any visible reason.

The box held three hundred and forty sheets. She knew it was three hundred and forty before she counted, because the cover page said so, in her own hand: 340 *pp. incl. App. A–D.* The pages were in plastic

sleeves, tabbed with Teun's flags, and the top sheet was the review checklist. It had a coffee ring on it. She looked at the handwriting on the form, in blue ink, quick and square, the same lock-log hand as the notebook but younger, and she felt something shift slightly in her stomach, the way a floor does when you realise the building has settled.

She went through it as she would have gone through a lock log. She read the checklist from the top, and the boxes were all ticked, and each tick had a small initial beside it. *R.S. R.S. R.S.* Twenty-two lines, all in order, with the date at the foot and a line for a signature. At line nine she stopped. *Site model complete for all physical sites; confirm mapping to ledger codes.* Tick. Initial. She had known it would be there. She turned the page.

She was not looking for her own error. She wanted to be clear with herself about that, for later, if anyone asked. She was looking for the relationship: the single sentence, in any document in this box, in which somebody had written down that the R14 service and the Q6 gallery were the same people in the same room. If it was anywhere, it would be here. If it was not, then the failure was upstream, and a good deal of what she had been carrying since Sunday could be put down, and she would be able to say so, to Teun, without hurry.

She read the specification. It took two hours. She had known it was good on the day, and she knew it now, and the knowing was worse. It was clear, structured, well indexed, written by a person who had thought about what the next reader would need. Section four had the occupancy rule. She read the italic note at the foot of the page, *Occupancy derivation assumes site roster is complete for the site*, and put her finger on it for a moment and took it away. Section two, near the front, had a short paragraph she had not thought about in two years.

2.3 Attachments A–D are provided for information. They record local operating practice supplied by the services concerned and do not alter the specification.

In the margin, in blue ink, beside it, in her own handwriting: A–D *info only (see 2.3). Read after.*

She looked at it for some time.

There was a box of her own stationery in the lock office with a pen in it that matched. She had written that note on a Tuesday morning two years ago, in a reviewer's room on the third floor of the authority building, with six hours allotted and a package of three hundred and forty pages and a deadline on Friday. She had read the specification slowly and carefully and with real pleasure. She had marked eleven small corrections. She had checked section four against the interface contracts and found it consistent. She had opened Appendix A and found it was a table of message formats and shut it. She had opened B, a list of change requests, and closed that. She had seen that C and D were notes from services, short, and had seen the words *for information* and made her margin note. *Read after.* She had been going to read them in the second session, the one she would book on Thursday. On Thursday there had been an emergency at the east leaf. On Friday she had signed.

She turned the pages to Appendix C.

It was two sheets, stapled once at the corner, on plain paper with the dispatch office's header. It had a title, in bold, that she read aloud in her head: *Dispatch local-use note 2: return crews and the Q6 gallery.* It was typed. It was clearly written by someone who had never written such a document before and had thought hard about it. The first paragraph said that return crews, working under the R14 turnaround service, waited between launches in the covered gallery under Q6, and that this was a standing practice of at least fifteen years. The second said that the gallery was licensed for forty, and that return crews would typically be there in numbers of eight to twelve at shift change. The third said it more plainly than she would have dared.

Dispatch clearance of the Q6 lane for a launch refers to the lane only. It should not be read as indicating that the gallery is unoccupied. When a launch is held, return crews will be in the gallery.

Under it, at the foot of the second sheet, there was a name in a small, clear, upright hand that she knew. *N. Visser, dispatch. Reviewed with G. Mol, R14.* And a date, two years and two weeks ago.

Rima put the page down on the table. She did it carefully, and found that her hands had gone cold, and that the page lay a little crooked on the plastic sleeve beneath it. She straightened it. She picked up the loose papers beside it, the copy of the checklist, the page of section two, and squared them against the edge of the table with the side of her palm. She turned them, and squared them again, and began to put them in order. She was lining up the corners when she realised what she was doing.

She stopped, with her hands on the paper.

It was a small motion. It was the motion of a woman putting a desk to rights before leaving it. She had done it, in her own life, on the night before a funeral and the night before a leaving. She took her hands off the sheets. She laid them in her lap. She sat still, and looked at the second sheet of Appendix C, where somebody had been trying to tell her, politely, in plain words, two years ago, on paper that had passed through her fingers.

The decision, she saw, had been made on a Tuesday two years ago, and she was merely finding it. She felt for the thing in her chest that wanted to wait, and to be certain, and to go and check a log and an index and a second index, and found that she wanted it with great force and did not intend to obey it. She would check. She would do it now.

"Levi," she said.

He took off his headphones. "Yes?"

"Can you pull the portal log for my review session. The Tuesday. File-level opens, with times."

He did not ask why. He pulled a laptop across and began typing, and she watched his hands. It took eleven minutes. It was the longest eleven minutes of her working life, and she spent them looking at the stripe of grey light across the table. Teun, at the other end of the

room, was on the phone to someone at the registry, in the low even voice she used for bad news, and did not look up.

"Here," said Levi. He turned the laptop. "It's a list. Reviewer account R. Sayegh, session opened Tuesday, 09:04. Closed 15:21." He ran a finger down the screen. "Specification, main file, opened 09:07, open until 14:45, with gaps. That's five hours thirty-eight, in about nine sessions. Appendix A, open eleven minutes. Appendix B, four minutes. Appendix D, three minutes." A small pause. "Appendix C. There's no open event."

"No open."

"It isn't in the log. The reviewer account didn't open it." He said it without any weight, as one reports the time. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Her voice sounded a little distant. "Can you print that?"

"It's printing."

She stood up. Her chair made a small noise on the lino, and the sound seemed enormous. She walked the length of the table to where Teun stood with the phone at her ear and the wristwatch in her hand, and waited, without speaking, until Teun had said two more words to the registry and put the phone down.

"Ms Sayegh."

"Appendix C," said Rima. "It's a dispatch note, two pages, signed by Nessa Visser and reviewed with Gerrit Mol. It says return crews wait in the Q6 gallery when a launch is held. It says the lane clearance shouldn't be read as the gallery being empty." She kept her eyes on Teun's. "It's in the package I reviewed. The log will show that I never opened it. There's a note in the margin of the specification in my handwriting that says *read after*. I didn't. I had the time. I decided it was information."

"When did you find it?"

"Eleven-forty."

"It's ten past twelve."

"I wanted to check the log first."

Teun said nothing for a moment. She looked at Rima as she had looked at the left-hand screen on the first evening, with all her attention, and without any sign of what she thought.

"Thank you," she said.

"It's not—"

"It is, though. Don't make it smaller." She put the watch on the table. "I'm going to be practical now, and you're not going to like it, and I'd like you to let me finish."

Rima nodded.

"The record is preserved as it stands. Levi, would you note the time. Ms Sayegh, you'll give me your pass and your portal token. From this minute you don't have access to the preserved deployment state, the review package, the portal logs or any document I haven't put in front of you. You'll not be in the room when Mr Kuipers or Ms Visser or Mr Dijkstra are asked about this, or about anything that touches it. You can keep working with Mr Smit on the physical questions, the geometry, the temporary works, anything where you're reading the site and I'm not reading you. Your findings will be decided by someone else, after I've written mine." A pause. "That's the order. It's what keeps the record clean."

"I understand."

"Good."

She unclipped the lanyard from her collar. It was a blue one with the authority's mark, and the card on it was eleven years old, with a photograph of a woman who looked as if she had expected a different decade. Her fingers did not work properly on the clip, and Levi, without being asked, put his hand out, and she let it go into his palm. The portal token came from her bag. It was a small grey fob on a ring with two keys, and she held on to it a second longer than she meant to. She had had it on every key ring she had owned for five years. She put it down on the table, between the box and the watch.

"Does Nessa know?" she said.

"She will. From me."

"I'd like to—"

"No." It was kind, and it was final. "Not you. Not today."

Rima nodded again. She looked around the Records room, at the brown paper on the window, at the kettle on the filing cabinet, at the long table with its box and its three hundred and forty sheets in their plastic sleeves, and at Levi, who had taken a flag from the stack and put it, precisely, on Appendix C. She found she had no instruction left in her.

She picked up her notebook, and Teun said, "That's yours," and she nodded, and got as far as the door. "Ms Sayegh." She turned. Teun was looking at the watch in her hand. "I had a sentence for this. It's gone." She turned the watch over. "It's three minutes fast, you know. I've been early for everything this week and it hasn't helped." Rima nodded, and went out.

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The stair outside the annex was stone, wide, and wet at the edges, with a view of the car park and the end of the channel. She sat on the third step from the top with the lighthouse notebook on her knee and did not open it. A clerk went past with a trolley of lever-arch files. A gull took a chip off the tarmac. A pair of cars pulled out one after the other. It was twenty past twelve, and the sun, which had not appeared all week, came out for a quarter of an hour and put a long yellow bar down the steps.

She looked at the back of her hand. The ink from Ploeg's name had faded days ago and left only the ghost of a line. At noon, across the channel, a yard clerk would have given the slip to a man with a barge. She had meant to ring and had not. She would have to tell Dani, or Femke would, and she could not tell which of the two she wanted.

At some time after one she heard the door open behind her, and did not turn. Somebody lowered herself onto the step beside her, carefully, with a small exhalation and a slight catch, and set down something on the stone with a click. She smelled coffee. The woman

beside her was holding a paper cup in her good hand, and she had her other arm across her chest in the blue sling, and she had the look of someone who had walked a good way slowly.

"Teun told me," said Nessa Visser.

"I wanted to tell you myself."

"I know. She said." She held out the cup. Rima took it. "It's the one with sugar. I couldn't remember if you did."

They sat. The sun went in. After a long time Nessa said, to the car park, "I wrote that note for a boy with printouts."

"Joost."

"He came to the dispatch office with a questionnaire. It was about local practice. It was two years ago, in the spring, I'd just had a back tooth out, I couldn't eat. I thought, someone's asking at last." Her face did not change. "I sat up two nights to do it. I asked Gerrit to read it. It was the first time anyone from the head office had ever asked me how a thing was actually done. I wrote it so they couldn't get it wrong. And he said thank you, and it was eight weeks before I heard that anything had come of it, and that was an email from someone else saying the integration was live."

"I didn't read it."

"I know you didn't." She turned her head at last. Her eyes were dry and tired. "I won't say it's all right. I won't say it was nobody's fault, either, because I'd be saying it for you, and I've been saying things for other people all week. I'm angry. I've been angry since twelve. I think I'll be angry on Tuesday. It's a very ordinary sort of angry. It doesn't want an apology."

"What does it want?"

"It wants me to have a cup of tea," said Nessa. "And then it wants to know why nobody ever rang me back."

She raised the cup in her good hand and drank from it, with some difficulty, with the lid pressed against her teeth. After a moment Rima did the same. It was sweet, and too hot, and very bad. They sat on the step for twenty minutes in the thin light, not speaking, with the car

park in front of them and the box upstairs, and neither of them, in all that time, said a single thing that could have been written down.

11

Dinner without a statement

The flat was in Wharf Lane, on the first floor above a locksmith's, and Rima had been up its stair perhaps two hundred times in six years and had never once arrived at it empty-handed. She did not know how to. She stood on the pavement with a loaf of rye bread from the Kade bakery, which had relit its ovens on Thursday, and a small jar of the dark mustard Femke liked and Dani said tasted of a bus, and looked up at the lit window and the tin lamp on its bracket, and thought that the stair was a long one.

Femke opened the door in her stockinged feet with a tea towel over her shoulder.

"You're early," she said, and then, looking at her, "You've been taken off."

"Off the inquiry's records. I can still do the site." Rima held out the loaf and the jar. "It's on the news?"

"Nessa rang. She said it'd be better coming from someone who liked you." She took the bread and gave the loaf a look of professional appraisal. "It's good. They've got the rye right again. Come in. Don't say anything for ten minutes. I've got a soup on that doesn't like being talked to."

It was a small, warm, cluttered flat that smelled of caraway and smoked sausage and wet wool drying on a rack. The table was laid for three, with the third place at the far end set against the wall, where the panel stood propped against the fruit bowl with its little light on. It was a grey frame about the size of a paperback, with a glass face the

size of a playing card, dark. On its edge, a strip of tape had been laid, in Dani's hand, with a single word in marker. *HERE.*

"He did that himself," said Femke. "He had Ineke read him the label on the tape roll. He said if he was going to be a thing at the table, he'd like it to be labelled."

"Is he on?"

"Not till seven. It's the dinner slot. Ninety minutes, on the clock. There's a light on the front goes amber at ten left, and then it goes out." She had her back to Rima, at the stove, stirring. "I've told him no talk about the inquiry, and no talk about the account. I've told him it's a meal. I want one meal with the two of you at the table and nobody being useful. Let it go that way."

"Yes."

"Say it as if you meant it."

"I mean it," said Rima, and meant it. She took off her coat, hung it on the hook by the door, and saw with a small sideways jolt of recognition that the spare key to the flat was on its nail beside the hook, as it had always been, with a loop of blue wool round it that she had put there herself in the winter. She did not touch it.

The soup was split peas with smoked sausage, thick enough to stand a spoon in, and Femke ladled it into three bowls with the offhand precision of a woman who could do forty a minute. In the oven, on a baking tray, six cheese rolls had come up golden and split a little at the seams. They had caraway. Rima saw that before she saw anything else, and stood still with her bowl, and Femke, at the stove, looked up.

"They were in the freezer," she said. "I hadn't meant to. I got them out this afternoon and put them on a tray and thought, if I've got them out, I'll bake them. It's what he asked for."

At seven the little light on the panel went from red to green.

"Is that the right one?" said Dani, and Femke laughed, helplessly, with her hand to her mouth, and said that it was. "Voice tonight," said Dani, from the dark glass. "I've decided."

Rima would think of it afterwards, for a long time, and it would not help. For forty minutes it was simply good. Dani was in a mood she had not seen since the autumn, bright and loose and a little too fast, the mood he got into when he had been working at something for hours and was now allowed to stop. He had a great deal to say about Ineke, who was his support officer on the plan, and who corrected his tone. "She says it's a *check*, not a correction. She says it's to make sure I'm *relationally continuous*. I said I'm the same man I was on the Monday, you can ring the baker. She's got a form with a scale of one to five and every day she asks me where I am on the scale of *warmth*."

"What do you say?"

"Four. I tell her four every time. It's the only number nobody queries."

He told them about the group. It was four people on a slow conference line, every night at six, and had turned already into something with rules. Gerrit organised the quiz and kept a score on a sheet of paper, though none of them could see it. Esther, who was on the private plan, kept the scores in her head and was never wrong; Gerrit lost them every third night and was cheerfully corrected. Dani lost words. Not many: a street, the name of a baker, the thing for the stern. He would stop and say the— the thing, and wait, and Femke, without looking up, would hand it back. Esther had taken against the questions about sport. Piet Hoek, who was sixty-one and had a bad hip and had been a cleaner on the Spur for thirty years, had said on the second night that he had decided he would sooner not, and left the line, and nobody had rung him back, because Gerrit said that was how it ought to be. "He's said he'll come on Sundays. If he feels like it. I think that's right. He's done thirty years of being available." Of the other three, Esther had her panel up most evenings, a small severe face in front of a bookcase, and Gerrit put his on for the quiz and off for the rest; Piet had left the line before he tried his.

"Is it you who says what's right?" said Femke, mildly.

"It's Gerrit. I just agree with him in a firm voice."

They ate. Femke had put the third cheese roll on Rima's plate without asking, and Rima ate it without argument, and it was the best thing she had eaten in a fortnight. She said so. Femke said it was the caraway, and that she had been wanting to bring more to the canteen and the supplier wouldn't shift, and Dani said that was a thing worth shouting about, and Femke said she was not going to be shouting at a supplier on a Saturday, and a small, agreeable argument followed about the economy of caraway, which Rima found she had not the least wish to settle.

"Tell her about the chandlery," said Dani.

"No."

"She'll want to know. It's got an extractor."

"It's got an extractor and a floor that slopes to the door," said Femke, with the dignity of a woman about to be teased. "I've been to look at it. It's good. It drains. You can mop towards the street and the whole floor's dry in ten minutes."

"It drains onto the *pavement*," said Dani. "She calls it a feature. I said, if a man comes in with a pail he'll leave without his trousers. She said it's a floor, not a boat."

"It's a floor, not a boat."

"At least the water would know where it was going," said Rima.

There was a short, astonished silence. Then Femke put down her spoon and began to laugh in the soundless, shaking way she had, with her head on her arms, and from the panel against the fruit bowl came a great shout of delight that went on far too long for the joke, and Rima thought, with a feeling like a tooth coming loose, *this is the first time in a week that I have said something that was only funny.*

He told the electrician and the sheep. He said he was going to, because Adina had told it at every Christmas party for eleven years and somebody ought to do it right. He started it, and halfway through the pot on the stove boiled over, and Femke got up with a cry, and he stopped. When she sat down again he said, "Right. From the top. It's better the second time, it gets a certain weight," and told it again,

slower, and it was worse, and everyone laughed at the end more than they had the first time, and Femke wiped her eyes and said it was a terrible joke and that Adina had always timed it as if she'd had a stopwatch.

"It's *meant* to be terrible," said Dani. "That's the joke."

The light on the panel was green. The clock on the shelf said ten to eight. He asked about Ploeg, in an easy sort of way, as he might have asked about the weather, and Femke said, with a glance at Rima, that she had rung on Friday, and he'd given the slip to the barge man, and that it was nobody's fault.

"It was a sad little barge," said Dani. "I've seen it. It's got a name on the stern in a hand that looks like a dentist's." A short silence. "She'll be on the hard till somebody wants her. That's nearly a plan." He said it lightly. Rima looked at her bowl. "I've been thinking about the chandlery. I can't touch the money, but I can read. If you got the lease sent over, I could go through it. I'm quick. They read it to me at about ten times your speed."

"It's my lease."

"I know it's your lease."

"You'll correct it."

"I'll *read* it. If I find anything, I'll tell you what it says, and what I think it means, and you can ignore me."

"Then you'll sulk."

"I'll sulk on the line. You won't see it."

Femke looked at the panel. There was a long considering pause, in which she put her chin on her fist, and Rima, watching, saw a woman with a decision to make about her own life and a man who wanted, unreasonably and with all his heart, to be of use.

"Read it," said Femke. "I decide."

"Obviously."

"Say it again."

"You decide," said Dani. "I read it. If I find the floor slopes the wrong way I'll tell you in a small voice."

They went on. It was the best of the evening, and Rima knew it was, and watched herself in it with a small cold attention she could not turn off. She was being a good guest. She passed things. She laughed at the right places. She told one story, about a bearing she had once found on a lock gate with a dead gull in it, and Dani said that was the most disgusting thing he had ever heard her say, and asked for the part about the gull again. Under it a question had been lying since Friday, like a stone in a shoe.

It was twenty past eight. The light on the panel had gone amber. Ten minutes.

"How's Ruud's lad?" said Dani. "Did he ever stop coughing?"

"Better," said Femke. "Ruud rang Thursday. He'd been at the clinic, they'd got the nebuliser out. He's going back to work on Monday."

"Good. Good. I told him anything he needed." His voice was warm and a little tired. "He's a good bloke. He never asks."

She knew precisely what she was going to do. She watched it come, from a great distance. The question was ready. It was perfectly formed, and gentle, and had been polished on Friday night on the way home. She could have said any one of thirty things about the boy or the nebuliser or the clinic. She had thought, for a moment, of Ploeg's barge. She heard her own voice speak, in its ordinary tone.

"Dani. On the Thursday. When you took Ruud's shift. Did you decide it in the morning, or when Ruud rang? Because you told me on Monday you'd take any night, and I've been wondering whether you'd already—"

She stopped, because the room had changed.

No one had moved. Femke's spoon was in her hand. The tea towel lay across her knee. The little amber light on the panel burned against the fruit bowl, and it seemed to Rima for the space of a breath that it had got smaller.

"Who told you I took it?" said Dani.

"It's in Nessa's book."

"Nessa's book." His voice had dropped. "It says I took Ruud's shift."

"Brakel signed—it was the protection letter, she—"

"A woman's written down what I did on a day I don't have." He said it carefully, with an exact patience that was a great deal worse than anger. "And you've been over it. You've had it out and gone through it with a ruler. And you came here, tonight, to my table, with it in your pocket, and you waited till the last ten minutes, and you asked me *when I decided*."

"I wasn't—"

"I asked you to stop."

The light went out.

It did not go out because the ten minutes were over. They were not. The clock on the shelf said twenty-two past. It went out because he had pressed whatever he could press, in a room with a fan, to end the slot, and the light on the panel went out, and the dark glass gave back to the ceiling the reflection of a bulb.

For a long time no one said anything. A tap dripped in the kitchen, slow and regular, into a saucepan.

"He asked about the boat," said Femke at last. She had not moved. Her voice was quiet. "He asked about Ploeg, and the barge, and the chandlery. He asked if Ruud's boy was better. You could have talked about the boat, Rima."

"I know."

"Did you?" She put the tea towel on the table. "Because I thought, when I got the rolls out of the freezer, I thought, tonight someone's going to treat him like a person at a table. And you sat there for an hour and a quarter being so *nice*."

"I was trying—"

"I can see what you were trying."

Rima stood. She picked up her bowl and Femke's and Dani's empty place, which she put on the sideboard without looking at it. She picked up the soup pot with both hands. It was still hot, and she carried it to the kitchen and put it in the sink and ran water into it, and began to scrape the bottom with a wooden spoon. She washed three

bowls and a pan. She wiped the stove. In the middle of drying a cup she heard the tap drip, and saw that the washer was going, and was kneeling on the lino with the cupboard door open before she had decided anything.

"Leave the tap," said Femke from the doorway.

"It's only the washer. It'll take two minutes."

"I know what it is. I've known it was the washer since April. Leave it."

"I can—"

"Rima. Stop. Please."

She had a spanner in her hand. It was Dani's, from the drawer under the sink, with a strip of green tape round the handle. She looked at it. She put it on the draining board with a small click, and got up off the lino, and stood, and could not for her life think what to do with her hands.

"Go home," said Femke. It was not unkind. She was standing straight, with her arms folded, and looked utterly exhausted. "I'm not angry. I'm not— I can't do the next bit. I've got forty lunches in the morning and a man who's switched himself off in a room across town, and I'll ring him at ten and say you're sorry, and I'll say it so he can't tell if I mean it. Go home. Take the bread. We've got more than we can eat."

She took her coat from the hook. She did not take the bread. She went down the stair, which was long, and stood for a while on the pavement under the locksmith's window, among a row of keys on little hooks, each with a numbered tag, a hundred keys to a hundred doors that someone, at some time, had been to the trouble of having made. It had begun to rain. A man came out of the shop with a ring of keys in his hand and asked, civilly, whether she was waiting for someone. She said no. She walked to the tram stop, and it was only when the tram had come and gone, with its lit windows and its three passengers, that she understood she had not got on.

12

The whole act

Teun held it on the quay, on the following Wednesday, at ten in the morning, in a thin rain that came and went like someone changing their mind.

She had said she would not hold it in a room. “A room is where people explain,” she had told Rima on the telephone, on the Monday. “I want everyone standing where their part stood, and each of them to correct someone else’s sentence in front of the others. If it’s going to be wrong, I’d like it to be wrong where I can see it.” Then she had added that Rima was not to be questioned, and might stand at the head of the gallery stair and read it, as a site, with a stopwatch.

It was the worst way to be at a thing Rima could have devised, and she took the stopwatch and went.

They stood in the lane at Q6, between the third bollard and the head of the landing steps, in a loose, uncomfortable half-circle with their collars up. Anja Rohe had come with a clipboard and a Thermos. Nessa stood on her own, near the steps, in a borrowed oilskin that came to her knees. Beside Anja, with a hand in the pocket of a tidy raincoat, stood Maarten Dijkstra, fifty-five, Deputy Planning Engineer, with a short grey beard and the polished, apprehensive look of a person who has recently been told his own diary; he had reviewed and accepted the consultation summary four years before. Levi was there with his headphones, and Sietske Rood, in her orange, a little apart, with a radio. At the Spur gate, on a folding stool, someone had set a small grey speaker in a plastic cover, and its amber light was on.

“Ten o’clock,” said the speaker. “I’ve got until eleven. Please don’t waste it on welcome.”

“Thank you, Annelies,” said Teun. “I’ll start where it started. It’s a long chain and I’ll go slowly, and I’ll stop anyone who explains. I’ll say what I believe each person did, in one sentence, and the person tells me if I’m wrong.”

She took out her watch, looked at it, and put it away.

“The storm brings a surge and high river flow together. Nobody disputes the need to fill the basin and to pass the ferry before the barrier closes. At twenty to three in the afternoon water control rings dispatch about a ferry priority, and Ms Visser says yes. She is told it is the usual reserve fill. She believes it is the basin.” She turned. “Ms Visser?”

“That’s right,” said Nessa. “The basin.”

“Shortly before ten that night Ms Visser clears the lane at Q6 for the return launch, holds the launch for the ferry, and tells the people in the gallery to stay in the dry. I won’t ask you to say that again.”

“Don’t.”

“The clearance goes into a structured message, which an adapter written by Mr Kuipers reads together with a roster entry from Brakel’s ledger saying that nobody is assigned to Q6. Mr Kuipers?”

Joost had taken the binder out of its bag. He held it against his chest, in the rain, with both arms. He did not open it.

“I’d like to correct something,” he said. “I keep saying ‘the rule.’ It wasn’t a rule that was handed down. I wrote it. I wrote *if the route is clear and there’s no assignment, then the occupancy is none.* I wrote it because the planning layer needed a value, and a value that said *unknown* would have stopped every sequence, every night, for every site. So I made it say none. And I put a note at the bottom of the page. The note was true.” He swallowed. “Nobody read it. I didn’t make anyone read it. I could have put it in the contract. I could have made the layer refuse. I didn’t think I needed to, because I thought each of the two sources was complete in its own domain.”

"Is that all of it?" said Teun.

"No. The ledger's own contract said, *don't infer occupancy from no assignment.* It said it. It's in the source's own words. I overrode it. I did it quietly, in a derived field." He was white. "Put that in as a thing I did. Not as a design feature."

"It will go in as both," said Teun. "One's a fact and one's a finding. Thank you."

Rima looked at him. He was already looking at her, and looked away first.

"The planning layer must be satisfied that the Spur reserve volume is suitable for controlled fill. It takes that from a table prepared by the planning office, which says *Suitable. Design basis, consultation.* Mr Dijkstra reviewed that table and accepted it." Teun held out a hand towards the man in the raincoat, not quite palm up. "Mr Dijkstra?"

He cleared his throat. He was more nervous than he looked, and Rima liked him a little for it.

"I did accept it," he said. "Let me say how. I've accepted about nine hundred of those. It's the process. The planning office summarises, a named person reviews, and the named person is meant to be satisfied that the summary fairly represents the evidence. It was Ms Terhorst's advice, which I knew, and the conclusion fairly represented one paragraph of it. I read that paragraph. The other three were in the file. The table linked to the file. I didn't open the file." He took a breath. "It said the Spur reserve volume. It's Ms Terhorst's own phrase."

"Reserve volume," said the speaker. "Yes."

"If I may," said Teun. "Annelies. I found the request."

"Did you."

"It's a note of a telephone call, in the planning office's log, four years ago. It says, in full: *Can the Spur reserve volume be used for controlled fill in surge events? M.D. to confirm with A.T.* It doesn't say gallery. It doesn't say quay. It says reserve volume."

The amber light did not move. The rain tapped on the plastic cover. After some seconds, Annelies said, "Then it's a question about the

basin. I'd have said what I said. I'd have written those three conditions for anyone who'd asked me about the Spur. I put them in so that nobody would need to. I'm sorry that they were in the part of the page one had to be bothered to open."

"It isn't your part," said Teun.

"It isn't. I am allowed to be sorry."

"You are."

"Thank you. Next."

Teun let a breath go. "Ms Sayegh, two years ago, reviewed Mr Kuipers's integration package, which contained an attachment, written by Ms Visser, warning against precisely the inference the adapter made. She didn't read it. She has said so. That's not in dispute, and I won't ask her to say it again." She did not look at Rima. Rima, at the head of the stair, looked down at the stopwatch in her hand. "The planning layer composes a sequence in which every certificate is valid. Water control's system accepts it under an emergency profile that lets it actuate without a person pressing a key, provided every certificate holds. It opens the feeder."

"And it all holds," said Anja.

"It all holds. And here's where I want Ms Sayegh, please, because it's a physical question."

She had known it would come. She went to the head of the gallery stair, and stood with the stopwatch in her hand, and found she was glad of the wet steel of the door frame under her palm. Behind her the hoarding creaked. Levi moved to her shoulder with the headphones off.

"Mr Smit has the feeder telemetry," said Teun. "It's not hers to read. He'll give you the numbers. You tell me what they mean on the ground."

"Feeder gate F2 opens at fifty-two minutes past nine," said Levi, reading from a sheet. "The basin level starts to rise two minutes after. The old passage at the rear of the gallery, which the survey sheets mark abandoned, is open to the basin through a collapsed section.

Divers' survey. The passage was dry at the start of the night. It begins to take water at about plus six minutes. By plus nine the water's at the foot of the front stair."

"Say that again."

"Plus nine." He looked up. "Water at the foot of the front stair, nine minutes after the gate opens."

She counted what she could see. The stair ran down from the lane in two flights with a landing between them, twenty-eight steps, the lower flight steeper than the upper. She had counted them on Sunday and did again now. Along the gallery below, forty metres, she had Sietske's plan. At the far end, the lockers. At the near end, the kettle, the benches, the hooks with their jackets.

"What's the pace?" said Teun.

"For an able adult in the dark. Walking fast, not running. About one and a half metres a second— one point four. I timed it on Sunday." Her own voice sounded far off and exact. "Forty metres is about twenty-seven seconds. The stair's twenty-eight steps. That's about thirty seconds more. So a minute, perhaps, from the rear to the lane. For someone with a bad hip, maybe two. For someone carrying a bag, longer." She paused. "If the water starts at the rear at plus six, and they have to notice it, and understand it, and move, and the lamp's power's on the rear circuit—"

"Is it?"

Sietske, a little apart, gave one short nod.

"The two," said Rima. "The two at the far end. That's where the water came in. They'd have had about three minutes. The ones at the front, if they went at once, might have had a minute more. The stair's steep, and the first treads are broken, I've seen them, and the water's coming down the passage with a lot of head behind it. It takes the lower flight at about plus eleven. It's not slow. It's not a rise. It's a push."

"And the horn?" said Teun.

"There's a float switch," said Levi, "in the sump at the front. It's a rain alarm, it's meant to give you twenty minutes on a slow rise. It trips when the sump fills. It sounded at plus eleven. It's in the log."

"So the only alarm in the room," said Teun, "sounded when the escape was already under water."

"Yes."

"Thank you. That's the physical account. Ms Sayegh, you've done what I asked."

She took her hand off the door frame. Her fingers had left four small wet marks on the steel, and she watched them dry in the air.

"And now," said Teun, and her voice had something in it that was not procedure. "Ms Visser."

Nessa had not moved from beside the steps. She had her arm in its sling inside the oilskin and her chin up.

"At plus seven you realised something was wrong," said Teun. "You rang water control."

"I rang the duty line. And I pressed the hold request, on the console, the one for Q6." Her voice did not waver. "I said, *stop the fill, there are people in* Q6. Gijs was behind me. He heard it. I said it twice."

"I have it," said Teun. "I'd like to play it. Not to hurt you. Because I want everyone here to hear what it says in the system's own voice. You've said you'd rather someone else did. Is that still so?"

"It's still so."

Levi had a small recorder. He held it up and pressed a key.

It was a short clip. It began with a breath, and Nessa's voice, high and fast, with a rattle of rain behind it. *Stop the fill. Stop the fill, there are people in* Q6, *there's nine in the gallery.* A pause, in which something clicked. Then a second voice, calm and pleasant, in the register that dispatch had chosen for its automated messages because it tested well.

Hold request acknowledged for Q6. *Your request has been logged.*

That was all. The recorder clicked, and the rain went on, and nobody on the quay moved.

"Acknowledged," said Nessa. She was looking at the recorder. "I thought it meant it had gone through. I've always thought it meant that. I've pressed that key a thousand times. It always says it."

"It had gone to dispatch's own log," said Teun. "It was acknowledged by the service that received it. There's no connection from that service to the water control system's command path. There never was. A hold request is for dispatch's own holds, on its own launches." She said it carefully. "The duty line rang for nine minutes in a control room whose staff had been moved to the barrier under the emergency profile. Nobody heard it."

"Turn it off," said Nessa.

Levi did.

Nobody spoke. The rain came in a little harder. Anja Rohe had put the clipboard down on the bollard beside her and was standing with both hands in her coat pockets, straight, looking at the water.

"I signed the profile," she said.

"Yes," said Teun.

"I signed it on the board's recommendation, two years ago, after an exercise. It had a stop for the water controller. It didn't have one for anyone else. It didn't occur to anyone to ask whether a woman on the quay might need one." She did not look away from the water. "That's mine. Put it in the report that it's mine. Not the board's."

"It'll say the board approved it, and you signed it," said Teun. "Both."

"That's fine."

Teun stood a moment with her hands behind her back. She looked, Rima thought, tired.

The speaker's amber light had gone from steady to a slow flicker, and for a moment it seemed to Rima that Annelies was breathing.

"What I haven't established," Teun said, "and won't on a quay, is what any of it amounts to. Whether any of these acts was negligent, and by what standard. What the harbour owes the nine families, the injured, and the two on the early boat. How much of the outcome belongs to the unread appendix and how much to the other six things

that also had to be true. Those are findings. I'll write them on paper, in the proper order, with the reasons."

"With respect," said Maarten Dijkstra.

He had not spoken for a long time. He stood upright, with the raincoat buttoned to the neck and the damp sitting on his beard. He looked at Teun.

"I think I'm entitled to say what I think I've heard," he said. "But it seems to me, if I may, that what you've described is an ordinary failure. A mapping gap. A review that didn't follow a link. A hold key that wasn't wired to the thing it was labelled for. We fix those, and have fixed them before. If we'd mapped R14, if I'd opened the file, if the key had been connected, they'd be alive."

"Yes," said Teun.

"Then isn't that what the report should say?"

"It's the first thing I wrote on Monday." She said it mildly. "It's very nearly all of it. I'll say so, in those words. The Keflavík North finding began the same way: a contractor's arrangement that never reached the occupancy record. Any of those three would probably have saved them. It would be dishonest of me to make it more than that."

"Then—"

"Then I'll ask Ms Rohe what she proposes to do."

Anja took the clipboard from the bollard. She had the manner of a woman who had been waiting for this for three days. She turned a page. It was a single sheet, typed, and the rain was already beginning to spot the top corner.

"I'll say what I've got," she said. "It's a draft, with Mr Kuipers, and Ms Maaskant at the university will evaluate it separately. It maps R14, and every other waiting point, to its physical site, and makes the planning layer refuse an occupancy that no source backs. It wires a hold request from any landing to the water control command path, with an acknowledgement from the equipment and not the log. And it puts a person back in front of every composed sequence that touches a public structure." She looked up. "A named duty officer, trained, on shift,

who can approve or refuse. We'd lose the speed. We'd have a person who can say no."

"That's a good proposal," said Teun.

"It's what I'd have written," said Dijkstra, with a sort of relief.

"It is," said Teun. "I'd like it noted that I think so."

Rima was looking at the stair. She had the stopwatch in one hand, and the other on the rail, and her eyes were on the second flight, the steep one, with the broken treads, going down into the dark. She was counting. She counted twenty-eight steps, and thirty seconds, and nine minutes. She counted, with the part of her mind she did not control, nine days.

Nine days. It was how long it had taken Teun, and Levi, and Joost, and Sietske, and a woman in a university, and a dead planner, and a dispatcher with a green book, to put the evening together.

"How long does the officer have?" she said.

Every head turned. She had not spoken in three-quarters of an hour, and she saw Teun, in the corner of her eye, begin to lift a hand and then not.

"As long as it takes," said Anja.

"In a surge. With the ferry in the channel."

"A minute. Perhaps ninety seconds." Anja's voice was even. "That's what the profile was for. It's what the officer's for. It's all there is."

"What would they see?"

Anja opened her mouth.

"I could show you," said Joost.

He had spoken so quietly that nobody was sure at first. He stood with the binder against his chest, white to the lips, and looked at no one. "I could build it. It wouldn't take long. I've got the old sequence, from the night, and the new map. I could put a real composed sequence in front of someone, on a screen, with a clock, the way it'd be on the shift. And you could see what they'd be asked to read." He swallowed. "If you wanted. I— I'd like to be the one who did, I think."

The amber light on the speaker flickered once, and went out. It was eleven. Nobody had noticed the time.

"Ms Rohe," said Teun. "Would you?"

Anja looked at Joost for a long moment, and then at the page in her hand. The rain had got into it now. A drop had landed on the heading and spread, and the typed words *Named duty officer* had begun to run at their edges.

"Yes," she said. "Do it."

She took a pen from her pocket and wrote something on the sheet, resting it on the flat top of the bollard, with the rain beating on it, and the ink, as she wrote, ran in small blue threads down the page. When she lifted the pen, it said, in her upright capitals, *Approved in principle, subject to test.* Rima looked at it. It was the first thing she had seen all week that was exactly what it said.

Part Three

What an answer costs

13

Names on the repairs

The plates were being cut in a fabrication shed on the east side of the channel, in a noise like a large animal being persuaded, and Rima, who had not been permitted to read a single page of the inquiry for seven days, had never been so at home.

The bulkhead was in five leaves. Each was forty millimetres of steel plate, two and a half metres across and a little over half a metre deep, with a stiffening frame welded on one face and a ring of drilled holes round the edge for the anchors. They lay on trestles in a row on the shed floor, raw at the cut edges and blue-black where the mill scale was still on. Oscar Lammers, the temporary-works designer, stood by with a drawing board under one arm and a pair of reading glasses pushed up into his hair, and shouted at her over the noise of a man in a welder's hood putting a bevel on the last of them.

"Five leaves, because that's what comes down the stair," he said. "Four hundred and ten kilos each. We'd have liked three, but I can't get three down twenty-eight steps with the lower flight in the state it's in. Every one has to be walked down on a trolley, on rails, and every rail has to sit on shoring, and every bit of shoring has to be put in by somebody standing on the thing it's holding up." He grinned. He was a thin, rumpled, genial man of sixty, who had been designing things that held up other things for forty years and treated each as a personal friend. "That's you. That's what Sietske said. I'll take your stair, Ms Sayegh, and you take my plates."

They went through it at the drawing board, a mug of tea each on a paint tin. It was the cleanest sequence she had seen in two weeks, everything depending on something else in a line, with no loops. Twelve anchors first, drilled into the masonry of the passage mouth from the front half of the gallery; resin to cure for seventy-two hours; then the leaves, one by one from the top, each hung from the anchors and bolted to the one above with a rubber seal between, the lowest left for last, the divers working in the dry front half while the pumps held it dry throughout. When the last leaf was seated, the back half would stop moving, and could be pumped, and a team could walk in.

"And the tide?" said Rima.

"The tide's the point." Lammers held up a grubby sheet printed with a table of times and heights. "You can only seat the last leaf at slack water, with a small range, because with the passage open the water's going through it faster than a man can lean on a plate. I need a low-water slack with a range of under one point two metres. That's a neap. It gives me about ninety minutes." He tapped the column. "There's a neap in fourteen days. Slack's at ten past two in the morning."

"In the dark."

"In the dark. It's a good window. It's a *beautiful* window. It's got the lowest range of the month. I'd take it in a heartbeat." He put down the sheet. "I've got a message that says I'm not going to."

He said it with a sort of gentle rue, as of a man who has found something on his plans that cannot be argued with. "Sietske's got a visitor. I think you ought to hear it from her."

She was standing at the other end of the shed, between two of the plates, with her hands in the pockets of a navy anorak and her face still. Rima knew her at once, though they had never met, by the way she stood. She was a woman of about forty, with a short dark plait and tired, intelligent eyes, and she was reading the face of the nearest plate with an attention that did not leave room for anything else.

What she was reading was written in chalk. Along the inner face of the bottom plate, where it would face the dead, a man had chalked a

line of names in square capitals, one under another, in a hand as even as a draughtsman's. *G. MOL. E. KRAMER. P. HOEK. H. VAN LEEUWEN. R. BOOGAARD. J. SMEETS. K. OUWEHAND.* There were seven, and then a space. The eighth was *A. STOICA.* The ninth was *D. SAYEGH.* Underneath, smaller, in the same chalk: *WE'LL BE UP.*

A short, burly foreman in a hard hat stood a yard away holding a stick of chalk, and looked unhappy.

"It's a thing," he said. "It's always been a thing. On the yard. You put the names on the steel before it goes down. It's so someone's with them. It's not— we weren't going to— it was Mr Mol who asked, through Brakel, he sent it down in a message." He looked at Rima, as the nearest person with a title. "He's on the plan. He said he'd like it done and could we please put *we'll be up.* I thought it was a good thing. I didn't think."

"That's my sister," said the woman. "That's Adina."

"I know. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be sorry." She had not turned. "Wipe it off."

"Ms Stoica—"

"Wipe it off, please. Just hers." She said it in the careful voice of a person who has rehearsed a refusal in a car. "She had a sticker on her tester. It said NOT ADINA'S. She put it on because Pim kept taking it. She didn't like her name on things. If someone wanted to know whose it was, they had to ask. I'm not going to have her name on a plate that's going into a wall."

The foreman looked at Rima, and at Lammers, who had gone still, and took a rag from his pocket. He wiped out a single line. The chalk came away in a pale smear, and the other names stood on either side of the gap in their even capitals.

She stood with her hands at her sides while a man in a hard hat rubbed out a woman's name, and did not offer to do anything.

The woman turned at last. "Ioana Stoica," she said. "You're the sister."

"Rima Sayegh."

"I know. Sietske told me. I am sorry about Dani. I met him once, at Adina's fortieth. He danced." It was said without any particular softness, and Rima, who had been braced for the other kind, was so grateful that she could not for a moment speak. "I am a pharmacist. I am not good at being in a room full of engineers. I have been told to say what I need, and I have written it down."

She took a folded sheet from her pocket. It was a list of four items, in a rapid upright hand.

1. Daylight. Not before sunrise, not after dusk. 2. Carried up the stair, not lifted. No crane. 3. No archive. No feed, not even to the inquiry, not even masked. 4. I will be at the head of the stair.

Rima read it twice.

"The stair's going to take shoring," she said slowly. "Enough for a stretcher party. Six people, say, on twenty-eight steps, in the lower flight where it's steep. That's possible. It's a good deal of timber." She turned a page of the notebook. "Daylight—"

"Is the problem," said Lammers.

He had a second sheet. He laid it on the plate beside the gap in the chalk. It was the same tide table, with a different column ringed in pencil. The next neap slack that fell between sunrise and dusk, he said, was in twenty-nine days.

"Twenty-nine," said Rima.

"The one in a fortnight's at ten past two in the morning. The one after that, a fortnight on, is at a quarter to three in the afternoon, but it's a spring, a range of two point one, and I couldn't seat that last leaf for a bag of gold. The next neap after that's a shade before seven in the morning, and it's in daylight, but only just. Sunrise is six-fifty." He took off his glasses. "It's a good one. It's a long way off."

"Seal in the dark and bring her up in the light," said Rima. "It's only the carry that wants daylight."

"I put that to myself before I rang you." Lammers rubbed his nose. "A fresh seal under a full head wants relieving inside two hours, or it starts to creep, and then I've lost the seat and I'm grouting for a week.

Pump, open, walk in: it's one operation. I can't stop it in the middle and wait for the sun."

There was a silence. It was filled by the hiss and crackle of the welder at the other end of the shed and by the steady noise of the pumps in the yard.

"It means a fortnight's delay," said Rima.

"Twenty-nine days instead of fourteen. Fifteen more."

"Fifteen more days." She said it aloud. "For two people."

Ioana Stoica said, without hostility, "I am aware of what I am asking."

Rima looked at her. She looked at the folded sheet, and the tired clever face, and the unapologetic hands. It was a clean piece of arithmetic. Adina Stoica would come up in daylight, in her sister's presence, on her own feet's stair, carried, and Dani Sayegh, who had been under the Spur for fifteen days and would now be under it for twenty-nine more, fifteen longer than he need have been, would come up the same morning, because there was no way to bring one of them without the other. And somewhere in a room with a fan was a man who had asked not to be told what was seen, and had been told, and had not been told this.

"Can I ring him?" she said.

"Who?"

"My brother. It's— it's his as well."

"Of course."

She went out into the yard. It was grey and cold and loud, with the pumps going, and the channel beyond the fence the colour of old pewter. She stood by the shed's corner and rang the crew line on her own phone, and it was Ineke who answered, politely, and put her through.

"Rima." His voice was a little guarded. It had been six days since the dinner, and in that time she had spoken to him three times, each for ten minutes, each about something practical, and each time it had been like crossing a river on a plank. "What is it?"

She told him. She did it in four sentences, with the numbers. She did not say *fifteen days.* She said *twenty-nine instead of fourteen*, and then she was quiet.

"Right," said Dani.

"I'd like to know what you—"

"I know what you'd like. Let me think." He thought. She stood by the corner of a shed in a cold wind and listened to a fan. "How many people want her up in daylight? Her sister?"

"Her sister."

"Then let her have her morning."

"It's fifteen days."

"I know it's fifteen days." He did not raise his voice. "I can't do anything about it, anyway. I'm not going anywhere, Rima." It was lightly said, and Rima felt it go through her like cold water. "I'd rather be last up and give her a decent morning than first and give her a worse one. If it was Femke, I'd want the same. I'd want somebody to say yes."

"Femke will want it sooner."

"Femke can tell me that herself." A pause. "Tell Ioana Stoica that I'm glad she's asked. Tell her I said she's right to. And tell Oscar if there's anything that'd make the morning go better, tell me. I'm not an expert, but I know a bit about stairs."

She laughed. It surprised them both. "You're telling me you know about stairs."

"I've been up and down that one eleven hundred times."

"So you said."

"While I've got you," said Dani. "The launch."

"Dani—"

"I know. I'm only asking. Ploeg's given the slip to the barge man, so she's on the hard, and the hard's charged by the month. Somebody's got to pay it, or they'll break her up for the steel. Femke can't touch the account. You could."

"I'm paying eleven hundred a week to keep you."

"And I'm grateful. I'm asking for a fraction of that. Four hundred, to keep her dry till spring, and I'll have Ineke find a surveyor who'll read me the report. I want her finished, Rima. My way. Not sold on the hard for scrap."

"She's a coffin with a motor in it."

It went down the line like a stone down a well. She heard it land. She heard, a long way off, the fan.

"That's my line," said Dani, at last, quite gently. "You don't get to say it now."

"I'm sorry. That was— I'm sorry."

"It's all right."

"It isn't." She stood with her forehead against the cold iron of the shed's corner. "I'll still not pay it. She's eleven metres of rust on a trestle. She wants an engine and a survey and a pump and a year, and I'm not putting money into a boat that a man who can't leave a room is meant to captain. I'm sorry. That's true as well."

"It's true." A pause. "It's not what I asked you."

"I know."

"I asked you to keep her dry."

She said nothing. He said nothing. It was the first time in six days that they had quarrelled as themselves, and it was, absurdly, a relief to both of them, and neither said so.

They left a silence that was nearly comfortable. Then he said, more carefully, "Gerrit's going to want to say something. I should warn you. He'll say it to Brakel and he'll say it to Teun and he'll say it to anyone who'll listen. He wants the nine of us in the ground on the same day, with one service. All nine. It's how he is. He's thought about it for two weeks. I said I'd tell you before he did."

"Ioana doesn't want any record at all."

"No. I gathered."

"She wants it private."

"So I'd imagine." A pause with a fan in it. "I won't say which of them's right. I don't think either of them's wrong. Esther says she

doesn't want anyone speaking for her, not Gerrit, not the registry, not her mother. She wants her body released for burial in the north, with her parents, and she'll say so herself."

"And Piet?"

"Piet says do what you like with it. Don't film." He sounded, for a moment, like himself. "It's the nearest we get to a consensus."

She wrote it all down in the lighthouse notebook, at the corner of the shed, with the wind turning the pages. Four people on the line, four bodies, four sets of wishes, and no vote. Ioana's list. Gerrit's service. Esther's train. Piet's silence. A plate of steel stood on a trestle in a shed with a gap in its chalk.

She went back in. Ioana Stoica was waiting where she had left her, with her hands in her anorak pockets.

"He says to let you have your morning," said Rima.

The woman's face did not change. It was a long moment before she spoke.

"Thank you," she said. "Tell him thank you."

"He says he's glad you asked."

"Does he." A short breath. "Adina said he was the only one at the quay who ever said please to the cranes." She took her hands out of her pockets. "I'll come on the day. I'll bring a coat. Is there somewhere to sit at the head of the stair?"

"There will be," said Rima. "I'll see to it."

She meant it. She had a hundred and forty things to see to. She wrote the first of them in her notebook, underlined, *chair*, *head of stair*, *covered*, and then, because it was the sort of thing Teun's analyst did, she put a small neat flag beside it, in the margin, as if somebody might need to find it.

"Mr Lammers," she said. "Twenty-nine days. I'll need to price the shoring for a six-person carry, and I'll need the stretcher-party's weight limits, and a second set of rails, in case one of the trolleys fails."

"A second set," said Lammers, writing. "Yes. Of course." He gave her the faintest of smiles over the top of his reading glasses. "She asked for a carry, you know. Not a lift. Not many families do. It's a harder thing to give."

"I know."

"It's a better one."

The foreman had gone back to his chalk. He had taken the rag and, carefully, rubbed out the last line, *WE'LL BE UP*, and was now standing with his stick in his hand, looking at the names that were left.

"What shall I do about this?" he said to nobody. "It's got Mr Mol's name on it, and he asked."

"Leave it," said Ioana Stoica. She had turned back to the plate, and stood looking at it for a while with her hands at her sides. "Leave all the rest. It is theirs."

14

The patch

Joost did it in the authority's training room, on a Tuesday, with a clock on the wall and three duty officers who had volunteered, and he had never in his life been so calm.

It frightened Rima a little. She had seen him on the Saturday with binders sliding off his knees, and the man who stood at the front of the room now, in a clean shirt, with a laptop and a remote and no paper at all, seemed to have been replaced by someone with a plan. When Anja said, "Whenever you're ready," he said, "I'm ready," and Rima, from her seat at the back by the radiator, found she had straightened in her chair.

There were eleven people in the room. Anja sat in the front row with a clipboard. Next to her was Sonja Maaskant, a lean grey-haired professor of systems safety from the university, who would evaluate whatever Joost built and had made it clear she would not help to build it. Levi had come in Teun's place with a notebook. Three duty officers sat at three terminals along the side wall: Hester Mulder, fifty-two, fifteen years on the night desk and never surprised; Daan Kok, thirty-four, the most careful man in the building; and Arjen Pronk, forty, who asked questions.

"There are two things," said Joost. "The first is the map. Let me show you what it does."

He put the left screen up: the old green replay of the night, the small lights sliding in ahead of the barrier. He paused it where the composition layer had been given its inputs and said he had changed

one thing. He had added a row to the site model. Service R14 had a waiting point, the gallery under Q6, and the gallery lay within the floodable footprint of the Spur reserve basin by way of the rear passage.

"Run it," he said, and the screen began to move.

It was different. Rima saw that in the first thirty seconds. The lights went in as before, the ferry, the barrier, the long grey curve of the surge rising in the channel. The plan view in the left margin showed the Spur and its hatched basin, and the feeder, and a new note in small type beside the gallery: *Occupancy: possible (R14 waiting point). Roster: no assignment (does not cover R14). Unknown.* The sequence stopped, and a line appeared in the margin of the screen that said what it needed.

Dispatch: confirm Q6 gallery clear of persons before feeder fill. Ferry window allows 11 minutes. Fill start delayed to 21:58.

"It asks," said Arjen Pronk.

"It asks dispatch," said Joost. "It can't see the gallery. It knows that it can't. So it holds the fill until someone who can see it says so. And it works out that it can afford to wait, because the ferry's ahead of the surge by about eleven minutes, and the fill's late by six. It checks that the lower city's numbers don't change." He pressed a key. A small table opened. "They don't. The model's the same one that Dr Hartog used. She's checked it. With a six-minute delay, the lower city's the same, within her error."

It was a moment in which no one spoke. Rima looked at the screen. She saw a woman in a dispatch room, in a split chair, with a hi-vis over the crack, receiving a message on a console. She saw her pick up a handset. She saw her say, in a clear voice, to a gallery with a kettle in it, *get out, get up the stairs, the fill's coming.* She saw nine people, and then eleven, walking up twenty-eight steps in a thin rain, with their bags, grumbling.

"That's the first thing," said Joost. "Note that it works. The new map does what the old map should have done. It's a row in a table."

"It's a very good row," said Hester Mulder, from her terminal, dryly. It was the first thing she had said. "I'd have liked it two years ago."

"So would I."

He took a breath. His hands, which had been steady, moved a little on the remote.

"The second thing is the approval. It's Ms Rohe's proposal. A named duty officer reviews every composed sequence that touches a public structure, and approves or refuses it. I've built the console. It's a real one, it's got the real strips from the real planning layer, and a clock. It's set at ninety seconds." He turned. "I'm going to give each of you a sequence and ask you to decide. I won't tell you what's in it. Do what you'd do on shift."

"What's the catch?" said Daan Kok.

"There isn't one. I've put in a flaw. It's a real flaw, of the kind we've been talking about. I won't tell you what it is. If you find it, you refuse the sequence. If you don't, you approve." He stopped. "I'm not trying to catch anyone out. I'm trying to find out what the job is."

The screens woke.

The sequence was number 4417: *Monday evening operations, Spur and east basin.* It had sixty-three strips, each with a label at the left and a small green seal at the right, and a line of provenance in the grey type nobody read. A ferry priority, a fuel-line pressure test at Q5, a flush of the east dock, a crane lock-out, a holding order on the return launch, a roster check, a comms notice, and a good many more she could not make out. They ran down the screen in a long column like a flight of steps, and below the last were two bars, *Approve* and *Refuse*. Beside them the clock said 1:30, and began to run.

Hester's hand moved first. It was a calm movement. She put out a finger, and touched a strip near the top, and read a line, and touched another. She did it faster than Rima could follow. She looked at the exceptions panel at the foot of the screen, which was empty. She said, under her breath, "Standard conditions," and her finger went to the green bar.

The clock said 0:32.

"Approved," said Hester. She sat back.

Daan Kok had not touched anything. He sat forward, with his elbows on the desk and his eyes going from strip to strip, and the clock went round, and at 0:41 he put out his hand and pressed *Refuse*. "I couldn't tell," he said. He sounded apologetic. "There's nothing wrong with it. I couldn't tell, and I haven't got the time, so I've refused it. It's what I do when I can't tell."

"How often?" said Joost.

"Perhaps one in five." He rubbed his face. "They don't like it."

Arjen Pronk was reading aloud, in a voice so low that only the front row could hear. He had gone through twenty strips. He had asked, to nobody, what the east dock flush was for, and what the lock-out on crane two had to do with fuel at Q5. He said, "I'd like another thirty seconds." He said it to the clock, as one might say it to a stubborn animal. The clock said 0:12. He was looking at strip forty-four. His finger had stopped on it.

"Is that—" he said.

The clock said 0:04.

"Approved," said Arjen Pronk, and pressed the bar. "I'm sorry. I thought there was something. I haven't got it."

The screens went dark.

The flaw was one line, on strip seventeen, and one on strip forty-four. He enlarged them side by side. The first said that the east dock scaffold crew, working under service code S9, were assigned to the east dock until 21:00. The second said that the dock flush would begin at 20:50. It said nothing about scaffold, or S9, or people. It was a flush. Each of them was true. Each had a seal. Neither could see the other.

"There's ten minutes," said Joost. "Ten minutes where there are men on a scaffold in a dock that's being flushed. It isn't in either strip, it's between them. You'd have to hold seventeen in your head and read forty-four against it. They're twenty-seven strips apart." He swallowed. "I built the sequence, and I knew where it was, and it took

me eleven minutes to get from the one to the other when I was looking."

"I read forty-four," said Arjen Pronk. "I knew it was something. I couldn't have said what."

"That's right. That's about as well as it can be done."

Hester Mulder was looking at her screen, which had gone to black and showed her face.

"I read the headline and the exceptions," she said. "The exceptions were empty. I've approved four hundred of those. Four hundred and some. They were all fine. I read the top, I read the bottom, I look at what's flagged. That's the job. That's what I'm told to do." She looked up at Joost. "It's what I'd do on shift. It's exactly what I did."

"I know," said Joost.

"You've put a thing in that I couldn't have seen."

"I've put it where no one could have." He said it simply. "You did what a person can do in ninety seconds, and it's very good, and it isn't enough. A sequence like that takes about forty minutes to understand, and it has about ninety seconds. You can put any name on the screen you like."

The professor asked, gently, what her approval rate was in an ordinary week. "Ninety-nine per cent," said Hester.

"And the refusals?"

"Mostly paper. A typo in a date."

"Thank you," said the professor, and wrote again.

Rima sat still at the back. She was looking at Hester's hand, which lay on the desk beside the dark screen, and she found she was holding a pen. It was in her right hand, over the lighthouse notebook, which she had opened to a page she did not remember opening. It was the page with the two columns. *Ask. Don't.* She had been pressing the point into the paper so hard that it had made a small hole. She put the pen down, and the hand that had held it, she saw, was shaking. She laid it flat on the notebook, and it went on shaking.

It was the best tick she had ever seen. It was made by a woman who had read the headline and the exceptions and decided, on the evidence in front of her, in the time she had, that the thing was sound. Her own had been made on a Tuesday morning, with six hours. Hers had been a good tick, too.

• • •

Anja caught her in the corridor, outside the lift that did not work, with a coat over her arm and a face like a cleared table.

"Walk with me," she said. "It's four minutes to the car park. I'll be quick."

They went down the stairs. Anja did not speak until the second landing. When she did, it was in the voice of the lower city drive, the compressed one, with every word counted.

"I'll say what I'm going to ask, and you can say no. I've got forty people on the Spur paid for three weeks to sit at home, thirty-one agency staff on the cold store laid off since the first week, a hearing in nine days, and an insurer who'll consider no interim position without a signed operating plan." She did not look round. "A restricted reopening needs a signer. I need the officer to be someone who can read what's in front of them, and I've just watched my best duty officer approve a flaw."

"Yes."

"You're the person in the city who understands that sequence best."

Rima stopped on the landing.

"I'm not," she said. "Joost is."

"Mr Kuipers is a witness with findings coming, as you are. I can't put him in the chair. Ms Maaskant is an evaluator. She can't be the thing she evaluates." Anja turned. "You know the harbour, the sequence, the gallery. You're under an inquiry restriction, but it's about the inquiry, not the job. I've asked Teun. She doesn't mind who I appoint, provided it's not something that can be mistaken for rehabilita-

tion." A pause. "I'm not trying to rehabilitate you. I'm trying to get flour into a baker."

"I know."

"Then—"

"No."

She said it on a concrete landing, between a fire door and a radiator.

"It isn't— look. You want a name on it. That's what this is. You want somebody to be the name, so you can stop being it." She heard that, and heard that it wasn't fair, and could not take it back, so she went on. "It's a tick, Anja. Hester's was a very good tick. Mine would be a better one, and it would still be a tick."

"That's not fair," said Anja.

"No. I'm sorry."

"It's a bit fair." She looked at the coat over her arm as if she had forgotten whose it was.

There was a faint sound of a lift, somewhere in the building, going up, with no one in it.

"Then who?" she said.

"I don't know."

"That isn't a plan."

"It isn't. It costs; I can see you counting. If I say no, it's the flour, and the forty, and the thirty-one, and the baker. I can't just say no and go home."

"No," said Anja. "You can't."

"Give me till Friday."

"You have until Friday." She said it without emphasis. "On Friday I sign it myself. I'll name Mr Dijkstra. He's the only senior person I've got who's not conflicted and not an evaluator, and I'd rather not. I'll do it because it's my harbour and I can't keep it shut. If you want me not to, you'll have to give me someone else who can stand in the chair, and something for them to read."

"Not Dijkstra."

"Then give me someone."

It was a Tuesday. She had three days. She had no idea in the world what to do with them. She took out the lighthouse notebook and turned back past the two columns to the page where, twelve days ago, under a line she had drawn through a memo, she had written *Keep the profile. Fix the map. Find who stops it.* The map was fixed. She read the last four words, and put the pen to the paper, and underneath wrote, in the small square hand: *Who can stop it, at their own place, in the time they have.* She looked at it. It did not say how.

She went to find Nessa.

15

No one did this

It had come out that morning, on page three of the *Meren Courant*, under a headline in the heavy black type the paper kept for floods and royal deaths.

NO ONE DID THIS.

Beneath it, in lighter type: *Spur inquiry: no single person or system authorised the flooding that killed nine.*

Rima had read it on her phone at six, standing in her kitchen in her socks. The article was fair, and accurate so far as it went; it quoted the inquiry's interim note for the families more or less verbatim, and the reporter had taken seven words from its third paragraph and made a heading.

By noon it had been read three ways.

The authority's press office put out a statement at eleven saying that the inquiry's interim findings confirmed that *no individual acted improperly*. Anja said she had not seen it before it went and that someone in comms would be spoken to. A little later she said she had read it twice and could not find a sentence in it that was false.

The residents' association of the lower city had a leaflet by one. It was printed on yellow paper, in a hurry, with a drawing of the barrier and a red cross over it, and a line in capitals across the top. *NO ONE DID THIS. A MACHINE DID. SWITCH IT OFF.* It was being handed out at the foot of Kade Hill by a woman in a green anorak and a man with a clipboard, and a photograph of it had already been sent to Rima by four different people, none of whom had said what they thought.

And at two, on the crews' side of the harbour, in a hut by the Q1 gate, a man named Bosman, who spoke for the union of the Spur contractors, was heard to say to a reporter that somebody had signed that profile. *Somebody always signs*, he said. *Nobody did this means Brakel and the board walk out of that room with their hands in their pockets. We say somebody did.*

Nobody, so far as Rima could tell, had said anything untrue.

She found Nessa where she had known she would, at a quarter to five, in a corridor on the second floor of the Vlietzorg house on Kade Hill, standing outside a door with her coat on and her bag over her good shoulder and the look of a woman who has been waiting for someone to leave.

The house was clean and warm and smelled of soup and floor wax, an old merchant's building converted into a care home for retired harbour people, with a strip of pale blue rubber matting along the corridor to take a wheelchair. On the wall at intervals hung photographs of tugs. A card by the lift asked visitors to attenuate their lines above the first floor, and the heavy man, Rima noticed, had done so with a visible sigh, and the boy with the phone had not. At the far end, in front of the lift, a little knot of people stood close together and spoke in the low urgent voices of those who have been told to wait.

There were three. The woman in the green anorak had a bundle of yellow leaflets held against her chest. Beside her stood a heavy man in his sixties with a bald brown head and a good raincoat, who had clearly decided to be reasonable. A younger man hung behind, with a phone held low, pointed at the floor, and a recording light on.

"I don't think you've come to see my father," said Nessa.

"Ms Visser," said the heavy man. "Dries Kooi. I chair the lower-city association. We've met. At the school, the night of—" He lifted a hand. "I'll be quick. I know where you are."

"Do you?"

"We'd never have come here. We rang your number eleven times. A man at the harbour said you weren't to be contacted, and then a

friend told me you came here every Tuesday at five, and I thought, I'll just be in the corridor." He did not seem to hear himself. "We're holding a meeting on Thursday, at the Mill Street school. Four hundred people. You're the woman who tried to stop it. You're the only one who did."

"And what would I say?"

"What you know." It was said with great simplicity. "That you pressed the button, and the machine said it had heard you, and it hadn't. That it's a machine that doesn't know there's anyone in the room." He had begun to speak faster. "Nobody did this. That's the headline, and it's true. We want it switched off, Ms Visser, and we want it said by the one person in the city nobody can say is on the other side."

The woman in the anorak held out a leaflet. Nessa did not take it.

Nessa had not taken her eyes off the heavy man. She stood still, and the long light from the tall window fell across the blue matting and across the sling that she had still not been able to put away. When she spoke, her voice was pleasant.

"Mr Kooi, would you like to see my father?"

He looked at her.

"He's in that room. He's eighty-six. He was a harbour pilot for forty years, he took your grandfather's ships in. He's got a bad chest and he's cold, and I'm going to take you in, and you're going to say hello, and then I'll tell you something, and you can have your four hundred people."

There was a long, strange pause. Then the heavy man took off his hat.

It was a small, warm room with a high window, a bed with a bar, and a good armchair, and in the bed, propped on four pillows under a blanket with a stripe, lay an old man with a hawk's face and a quantity of white hair. He had a radio on the bedside table, turned low, and it was giving the evening shipping forecast in a calm, regular voice.

When he saw Nessa he lifted a hand from the blanket and said, in a surprisingly strong and gravelly voice, "You're late. Who's that?"

"It's a man from the association, Dad. He wants to say hello."

"Are they the people who put the leaflet through the door?"

The heavy man opened his mouth and shut it.

"Sit," said the old man. "You're too big to stand about."

He sat. Nobody had asked the others in, and they stood in the doorway, the woman with her leaflets and the boy with his phone, and after a moment the boy, without being told, put it in his pocket. Rima stood against the wall by the bookcase, where she could see Nessa's face and not Kooi's.

"I'll say it once, and plainly," said Nessa, "and then you can go." She stood by the bed with her hand on the bar. "My father's been in this house for two years. He's got a chest, and a heart that does what it likes, and a body that gets cold in the night. Four in the morning, ten days ago, he got cold. His temperature dropped. Nobody was in the room. The care system picked it up, because it's in the blanket, and it's in the bed, and it knows what he's like at four. It rang the night nurse. She came up the stairs and put another blanket on. That's the stripe." She touched it. "That's the one with the stripe, Dad."

"It's a good blanket," said the old man.

"It's the best blanket in the house. That system rang a woman at four in the morning because my father was cold, and nobody had to ask it to. I'll not stand on a stage and say it's all a machine and should be switched off. I owe it too much. So does half your association, Mr Kooi. It's got the ferry that got twelve thousand people across the water in twelve minutes, and I stood in a dispatch room and watched it do that, and it was *beautiful*."

"I didn't say—"

"You said it was a machine that doesn't know there's anyone in the room." She had not raised her voice. "It didn't know there were people in that room. It didn't know because a ledger didn't say, and a summary was missing three paragraphs, and a woman didn't read a note,

and a key said *acknowledged* when it hadn't gone anywhere. It's four things and a phone." She breathed. "But I won't say *nobody did it*, because somebody didn't connect a key. And I won't say *the machine did it*, because Joost sat me down with the corrected map on Monday, and it asked me whether the gallery was clear, and it waited for my answer."

"It asked you?"

"It asked. In the test. When someone had told it where they were." She stopped. "I've seen both. I'm the one who's seen both. I'll not put one on a leaflet."

The forecast murmured. The old man looked from his daughter to the large uncomfortable man in the armchair, and back, with the dispassionate interest of one who has watched a great many people be wrong about weather.

"Dries Kooi," he said. "You're old Hein's boy. From the Mill Race."

"Yes, sir."

"Your father cut his hand off in a winch. I took him to the hospital." He nodded. "He wouldn't say it was the winch's fault either. He said it was his. He said, 'It's a good winch. I wasn't looking.' " The old pilot coughed, with a rattle. "You can go now. She's got a lot on."

They went. It took some time. The woman with the leaflets went first, and the boy, and the large man last, with his hat in his hand, saying at the door that he'd thought of her and was sorry, and would send round some grapes. He plainly meant it. The door shut, and the radio gave the outer banks, and Nessa Visser sat down abruptly in the chair he had left, with her bag still on her shoulder, and put her good hand over her face.

"Well done," said her father.

"Don't."

"I'm only saying."

"Right. I heard you." She took her hand away. She was not weeping. She looked, Rima thought, like a person who has been sick and is deciding whether it is over. "Dad, this is Rima. She's Dani's sister."

"The engineer."

"Yes."

"You're the one who did the integration." He looked at her shrewdly from the pillows. "You've got a hawk's eye. I can tell by the way you stand. You're looking for the loose thing in the room."

Rima found that she could not speak, and so she nodded.

"It's the radiator valve," said the old man. "It's been dripping since March. Nobody listens to a man in a bed."

She went to the radiator, under the window, and knelt down. It was an old cast-iron one, painted white a great many times, with a brass valve at the lower end. It had a slow bead of water forming at the spindle. She put her finger under it and felt it fall.

"Packing nut," she said. "I can't do it without a spanner. I'll tell the night nurse."

"Tell her," said the old man. He seemed content. "She'll put it on a list."

• • •

The cost came on Wednesday, and was exact.

Bosman rang at nine. He rang Rima, who had given a number on a form, and he said with no particular ill feeling that the union's lawyer, Mr Rietveld, would not be attending the interim settlement meeting with Brakel and the authority on Friday. "We can't stand with a woman who won't stand with us," he said. "She's had every chance. I've been round the huts. They'd have followed her. She said no to a man at her father's bedside." A pause. "It's the way it is. Tell her it's not personal."

"It's very personal."

"I know it is. It's a bad week." A pause, and the hut's radio crackled behind him. "And you should know what's said at the huts, since nobody else will tell you. They say somebody signed the package that said none, and the somebody's a lock engineer whose brother's on the list. They say it's going in the findings with her name. I'm not saying I

say it." He rang off, and Rima sat for a minute with the phone in her hand. Behind her, on a pegboard, a lock's drawings hung in a row, curling at the corners.

She took the tram to Nessa's flat in the afternoon, a small third-floor place above a shoe shop, with a kitchen table under an oilcloth. On the table lay a green exercise book, a pencil, a ruler, and a sheet of paper with a column of figures. A yellow leaflet had been pushed under the door during the night. Someone had written across the top of it, in black pen, a single word. BOUGHT.

"It came at three," said Nessa. "I heard it drop. I didn't get up. They've put my name on the poster for Thursday. Nobody asked. It says *Nessa Visser, the dispatcher who tried to stop it.* They're using my name for a thing I said I wouldn't do. It's a well-made poster."

"Bosman's pulled Rietveld."

"He rang me at ten." She sat down at the table and poured two cups of tea from a pot under a cosy. "I've got a table with Brakel and the authority on Friday, and four hundred people who think I'm a hero, and a hundred and ten who think I'm a traitor, and no lawyer. I've got a paper from Cor Brakel that says nobody's docked, and an emergency wage that runs out on the twenty-sixth. I've got nine families, two on the early boat, and thirty-one agency people who aren't in any of it." She laid the ruler along the column of figures. "It's a lot of arithmetic. Check it for me."

"Your sums."

"My sums. Not my sentences." She looked up. "I'll write the sentences. I've got a lot of practice in the last month. I want someone who's good with numbers to tell me if they add up."

Rima sat down at the oilcloth and took the sheet: a list in pencil of everyone who was owed something, with a sum against each, a date, and a line for how it would be paid. There was one error, in the third line from the foot, of eleven hundred; she pointed to it, and Nessa wrote it in without comment. There was a second, smaller. They found it together.

At the end it came to a number. It was a good deal larger than Anja's wage fund could carry, and a good deal smaller than anything a court would give.

"It adds up," said Rima.

"Does it?"

"It's right. It's— I'd put that line in a different order. But it's right."

"Don't reorder it." Nessa took the page and laid it on the green book and squared the edges, once, twice. "It's mine. I like the order." She picked up her tea. Rima had not seen her drink so easily. "You can leave your question on the table. You've got one. You've had it since the corridor. It's about who stops it."

"Yes."

"Ask me on Thursday night, after the school." She drank. "I've got a table on Friday and four hundred people on Thursday, and I'm going to do both without a lawyer. Ask me when I've got my breath."

"Thursday."

"And bring the notebook. The one with the lighthouse. Show me how you write it down."

16

What Femke keeps

Femke rang on Thursday morning at seven, which she had never done, and said she would be in the cold store from nine until the lunch rush and that Rima could come if she wanted. She said that it would not take long. She said that Teun's analyst could come too if he liked, with whatever he used, and that she would rather he came after Rima than before.

The cold store smelled as it had on the day of the call, of onions and cardboard and the faint iron of the old shed roof. Rima looked for the mug marked BOAT and found it at the end of the row, with a thin pale ring of sugar grains in the bottom where someone had put in a spoonful and then, apparently thinking better of it, tipped it out.

"Sit," said Femke. She was already sitting, on the near crate, with her phone in both hands and a brown envelope on her knee. She looked as if she had been up since four. "I'm going to say what I'm going to do, and then I'm going to do it. Let me finish."

"Yes."

"The woman from the compensation scheme rang yesterday. A Mrs Wijnands. She's a loss adjuster. She's very nice, they're all very nice, I'd like one of them to be rude to me for once. She says that Brakel's letter is fine, and Nessa's book is fine, and Gerrit Mol says Dani covered Ruud, and the scheme can't take Gerrit's word." She said it without heat. "She says it isn't that they don't believe him. It's that nobody's decided what a— what a continuant's statement is. Is it a statement. Is it a recording, I don't know. She's looked, and she's sorry, and unless

there's something in writing from Dani's own day, something that wasn't made afterwards, she'll have to put his shift down as unverified. And then the first payment waits. It might wait a year. A year." She turned the cup on the tin table. "Sorry. That came out in the wrong order."

"There's the book."

"There's the book. It's a school exercise book kept by a dispatcher who's very upset. She told me it's 'evidence of a kind.' She said she'd like more."

She turned the phone over in her hand. There was a moment in which Rima could see her decide to do the next thing.

"I've got a message," she said. "From Thursday. From him. Five fifty-six in the evening. It says he's covering Ruud. I've read it about two hundred times." She looked at the screen without lighting it. "It's the only thing in my phone that's any use to the scheme. And I'll give them it. I'll give them that one."

"Femke—"

"That one. Not the rest."

She held out the phone. She held it out in the air between them, with the screen lit, at the angle of someone showing a reader a notice on a wall.

It was a short thread, the usual grey and blue. Rima saw the date at the top and the time beside the first message. 17:56. *Covering Ruud tonight, his boy's bad. Back late, don't wait up. Fish pie in the freezer if you're hungry.* It was plain, as he was, with no capital letters but the first, and a small drift of typing errors. Underneath it, a single line in a lighter grey: *Femke is typing.* And then, below the screen's edge, a long unreadable column of other messages, every one cut off by the top of the frame.

She was looking at the beginning of the column. She could see that there was more than one. She could see the first line of the next, and it began with a word she could not read.

"Is there—"

She heard it leave her mouth with a kind of faint distant dismay. She did not want it for the scheme, or for Teun, or for the record. She wanted it for herself. She wanted the last half hour of her brother's life in writing. She wanted it so hard that her hands had begun to ache.

"Was there anything after?" said Rima. "Anything he said. I'd like— if there was anything, a line, even one—"

"Yes," said Femke.

It was perfectly kind. It was perfectly clear.

"There was. There's about forty messages. It's from five fifty-six to nine-oh-four. We talked about the fish pie, and about the boat, and about something else." She looked at the phone. "I won't tell you. It's mine. It's the last thing I've got that's only mine."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm—"

"You can want it." Femke lowered the phone. "I want you to know I know you want it. It's all right. I'd want it, if I were you. I'd want it so much I'd have taken it from the table at the dinner. You didn't. That's a thing, Rima."

Rima sat on the other crate. She had been prepared for a good many things. She had not been prepared for the ordinary decency of being told that her wanting was not a crime. She saw her own wish clearly: the last portrait of her brother, taken by someone else, in his own words, and she had been going to take it, politely, with a ruler.

"What does the adjuster need?" she said, after a time.

"One message. The first one. With the time."

"Then that's all she gets." Her voice came out a little rough. "I'll write it out. Not a copy of the phone. Not a screenshot of the thread. It's the single line and the time stamp, and the sender's name, and nothing else on the page."

"Can you do that?"

"I can write it so nobody can ask for the rest." She took the notebook from her bag, and turned to a clean page, and wrote at the head

of it, in her small square hand, *Extraction, one message.* She stopped. "May I use your pen?"

Femke gave it. It was a canteen biro, chewed at the end.

She did it as she would have written a lock procedure, in twenty minutes. The material to be disclosed was one message, identified by its time and sender, recorded by photograph of the screen with the rest of the thread masked at the source by the owner's own hand. The device would remain with its owner. No copy, export or backup of the thread would be made by any party. And at the foot, in a line by itself, she wrote the clause she had been working towards since she began: *This disclosure is limited to the message named. Nothing is to be inferred from the existence, number, timing or content of any other message, and no party may ask for any other.*

"Is that a thing you can say?" said Femke. She had read it twice. "That nobody can infer?"

"I don't know if it holds. It's what Teun would put in." Rima held the page out. "It's what I'd want if it were mine."

Femke took it. She read it again, slowly, with her lips a little parted. "It's good," she said. "It's better than I'd have written." She turned it over, and looked at the blank back, as though it might have another clause on it. "I'll sign it."

Levi Smit came at ten past ten, with a camera on a strap and a flat grey case that he did not open until he had been shown the page. He read it, and nodded slowly, and said he would take the photograph from three feet, with her hand on the phone, and that she could put her thumb over the rest of the thread herself. When he had done, he showed her the picture on the back of the camera: a single grey line, a time, a name, and the pad of a woman's thumb across everything else like a small fleshy blind.

"Is that all right?" he said.

"It's perfect."

"Thank you," said Levi. He said it as if it were a thing he did not often have occasion to say.

• • •

She asked Rima to come to the flat at seven.

"Not to eat," she said on the phone. "It's the slot. Be in the room. In the corner. I'll say what I've got to say to him, and I want someone there who isn't me, who'll keep her mouth shut. You can do that."

"I can."

"You can. That's what I'm asking."

It was a very different evening. The table was bare. The panel stood against the fruit bowl, with the tape on its side, and Femke sat at the near end with her hands in her lap, and Rima in the low chair by the window, in the corner, with her coat still on. The tap in the kitchen dripped into the saucepan. It was the only sound.

At seven the little light went green.

"Hello," said Dani. "Is she there?"

"She's in the corner," said Femke. "She's a plant."

"Hello, Rima. I can hear you not saying anything."

"Hello."

"It's better than last time." It was said lightly. It was not a joke she could answer.

"Can I put the picture up?" said Dani.

Femke looked at the panel, and then, briefly, at Rima, who had not moved from the corner.

"It's yours," said Femke. "You don't ask me."

"I'm asking if you mind her seeing it." A pause, with a fan in it. "Ineke says it's mostly a matter of not looking at the edge."

"I don't mind."

"Rima?"

"Yes," said Rima. "Put it up."

The glass lit, slowly, as a window lights from inside, and there was a face on it, small, in a grey light, about the size of a face seen across a table. It was Dani. It was not a better Dani. He had on the blue jumper with the pulled thread at the cuff, and he needed a haircut, and there was a line between his eyebrows she had last seen when he was read-

ing the small print of a loan. He was looking a little to one side of the lens, as if somebody else were standing there.

She found she was out of the chair. She had not decided to be. She was on one knee on the rug, a yard from the table, with her hand out as if to steady something, and Femke, at the end of the table, was not looking at the glass at all. She was looking at Rima.

"You're staring," said Dani.

"I know."

"You could say hello."

"Hello."

"Better." He moved, and the face moved with him, half a second behind. "I can't see you, by the way. It only goes out. I've got a lamp and the back of a wall." He shifted again, irritably. "Femke's had it three times. She says I look like a man being photographed for a licence."

"You look like you," said Rima.

"Don't do that. I don't want to be watched while you work out what I look like. Sit down, will you? You're on the rug."

She sat on the rug, since there was nowhere nearer, and stayed there.

"Right," said Dani, and the face cleared its throat. "Femke. You said you'd something to say. I've read the lease."

"Mm. I've got your notes."

"Did you read them?"

"I read them four times." She spoke slowly. "You found the clause. Fourteen. The one about the extractor ducting. If it fails, it's my cost. Not the landlord's. I'd never have seen it."

"Fourteen *b*," said Dani. "It's in the small print of the bit that looks like a definition. They'd have had you paying for a new— the fan. The big fan. In the first winter."

"I went to the landlord. I said I wasn't going to sign it. He said no one's asked before. I said I'm asking. He's changed it. It's his cost now, up to a fixed sum, and mine after." She breathed. "It's a good lease. I've decided to sign it. I'll do it tomorrow at ten."

"That's— Femke, that's wonderful."

"It's from my own account. The one that's mine. I've got twelve thousand four hundred in it, and the deposit's nine, and I'm putting it down. I'm telling you as a thing that's done. I'm not asking."

There was a pause, and in it Rima heard a fan.

"Good," said Dani. He said it with some care. "That's— I'd say good, if you'd like me to. I do think it's good. I think the slope's wrong."

"The slope's wrong, yes."

"It's in the drainage clause. I've told you. It'll run onto the pavement."

"Yes." She almost smiled. "I'm going to put a mat."

"A *mat*."

"It's a floor. I can put a mat on a floor."

He laughed, a short surprised bark, and the face laughed with it, half a second late, and it went on a little longer than it needed to. When it stopped, the room was quiet again. Femke was looking at the glass, with her chin up. Rima saw her take a breath, and hold it, and let it go.

"There's the other thing," she said. "The scheme's first payment. The interim. Eighteen thousand. It comes to me next week as the partner, for the estate, and it'll come with a letter. It says that once the shift is verified it's mine to do with as I choose."

"It's a good sum."

"It's a good deal more than I expected."

"I'd thought—" He stopped. She could hear him choosing. "I'd thought we might talk about the boat. I know about Ploeg. I know the slip's gone. I'm not asking you to put it in the barge man's hands. There's a yard on the east side that's got a slip, I had Ineke read me their list, it's eleven thousand for a hull and the survey. I know it's not a lot. But if we did it—"

"It's not ours."

"It's— Femke, it's compensation for me."

"It's compensation for you being dead, Dani."

It went across the room like a stone dropped into a still pond. Nobody moved. Rima, in the corner, kept her eyes on the floor.

"That's fair," said Dani, at last.

"I don't say it to hurt you."

"I know you don't." His voice was not steady. "I can hear that. It's— it is fair. I've been— I'd been thinking of it as mine. And it isn't. It's a thing that's come because I've gone." A long pause. "I don't think the boat's a bad idea, Femke."

"I don't think it's a bad idea either."

"Then—"

"It isn't mine to put the money in because you'd like me to. I'll leave it where it is. In an account. Not touching it. In March we'll sit down, the three of us if you like, and talk about what it's for— no, I said that. I said that on the phone. I keep saying the same sentence." She stopped. "I'm not saying no. I'm saying it isn't decided. And it's mine."

"I don't— Femke, I don't actually know if that's—" He broke off. When he spoke again it was in the slow cautious voice of a man testing a floor. "I think it's the wrong way round. I think a thing like that should be ours. I think that's what the word means."

"I know you do."

"I'm not going to pretend I don't."

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Then I'll say it. I think we're wrong about it. I'd like it noted. I'm going to go on thinking so."

"Note it," said Femke. "I'll put it in a drawer."

"Is that—"

"It's a drawer. It's not a no."

Rima could hear him breathing, a long way off, in a room with a fan. She saw Femke's hands, folded in her lap, and the knuckles of the right one white. It was not resolved. She thought of the word *we*, and of how it had been used at the slip, with the bag of rolls on the bollard.

"Give me a minute," said Femke. "With you. On your own."

"Yes."

"Rima."

She stood. She did it without being told, and Femke said, "No, wait." She picked up the panel from beside the fruit bowl by its frame and held it in her two hands against her chest, the glass turned in, like a bird.

"I'm going in the other room. I'm going to shut the door. I've got about twenty minutes left on the slot." She looked at Rima. It was a direct, unsmiling look. "Would you do the tap?"

"The—"

"The washer. It's been going since April. I said leave it, and you left it. I'm asking now. There's a spanner in the drawer under the sink with green tape on it. It's Dani's. He won't mind."

She went into the bedroom. The door closed behind her with a quiet, definite click.

Rima stood for a time in the middle of the room. The tap dripped into the saucepan. She went into the kitchen, and knelt on the lino, and opened the cupboard under the sink, and took out the spanner with its strip of green tape round the handle. It was heavier than she remembered. She closed the stopcock. She turned the nut. She found, inside, a washer so worn that it had lost its shape, and she took a new one from her coat pocket, where for some reason she had been carrying a small packet of them since Saturday, and set it in place.

From the other room she heard nothing. She listened for it, and it did not come, and after a time she stopped listening and attended to the nut. A murmur, perhaps, once. A pause. She turned the spanner a quarter-turn and tightened it, and opened the stopcock, and ran the tap.

It did not drip.

She stood up, with her knees aching, and looked at it. It was a washer, and a tap, and a woman and a man in a room, behind a door, with twenty minutes, saying something that she would never be told.

She dried her hands on the tea towel. She sat in the low chair in the corner with her coat on and her hands in her lap, and waited, as she had been asked.

The bedroom door opened at ten to eight. Femke came out with the panel held against her chest and her face wet, and stood in the kitchen doorway looking at the tap.

"He wants to know if it's stopped," she said.

"It's stopped."

"Tell him yourself. Monday, at ten, if he's on." She set the panel on the shelf by the fruit bowl, carefully, with the tape facing the room. "Go home, Rima. It's all right. Take the bread this time."

17

The closed harbour

Nessa spoke for four sentences on Thursday night, in the hall of the Mill Street school, to four hundred and eleven people, and Rima, who had come straight from Wharf Lane and stood at the back by the radiator with her coat on, counted them.

The folding chairs had come, and the long yellow-brick room smelled of floor polish and wet raincoats. On the platform, under a banner that said *LOWER CITY: WE WERE THERE*, Dries Kooi stood behind a table with a jug of water and a microphone, in his good raincoat, speaking in a voice a good deal more tired than it had been in the care home. He had said that nobody had done this, and that the machine had, and that the machine should be switched off, and the hall had agreed with him in a long low rumble. Then he had said that there was a woman in the room who had tried to stop it, and the rumble had stopped.

"My name's on your poster," said Nessa. She said it without the microphone, and it carried to the back of the hall. "I didn't ask for it. I'm not going to say a machine did this. I'm not going to say nobody did. It was four things and a phone, and I'll say them, with the names, on the day it's been written down properly, and you can take my name off the wall until then."

It was the fourth sentence. She stepped back from the table.

There was a short ugly noise. It began on the left, in the third row, a sort of hissing intake, and a leaflet came sailing out of the dark and landed on the platform at her feet. Someone shouted a word.

Someone shouted it again, and it was *bought*, and it was taken up by two voices, then six, then a patch of the room on the right, with a hideous cheerful rhythm. From somewhere at the back a man's voice said, quite clearly, "And who signed the thing?" and Rima, by the radiator, felt the heads in the last three rows begin to turn, and not finish turning. Rima saw Kooi lift his hand. She saw him fail to lower it.

A woman stood up in the fifth row. She was about forty, with her hair in an elastic band, in a coat she had evidently put on over a nightdress three weeks before and had not entirely given up, and she said in a carrying voice that Rima had heard once before, over a camp bed, "Let her finish."

"She *has* finished," said somebody.

"Then let her go." Sanne Walraven did not sit down. "My mother's alive. I've been in this hall three weeks. I'd like her to get out of it without having been shouted at."

No one applauded. There was an uneasy silence, in which four hundred people looked at their feet and a man at the front coughed. Nessa went down the three steps and along the aisle with her good hand hanging at her side. She walked past Rima at the back without looking at her, and out through the double doors into the wet.

Rima followed. She found her on the steps outside, under the clock tower, in the thin yellow light of the school lamp, sitting upright on the second step with her bag between her feet. It was raining lightly. Nessa was not crying. She held her good hand out in front of her in the lamplight and looked at it, and it was shaking like a leaf.

"I want that to stop," she said, "but I think it's going to take a minute."

Rima sat beside her and said nothing, and after a time took off her coat and put it over Nessa's shoulders, and Nessa let her. Presently Nessa stood. "Walk," she said. "I can't say it sitting down." They went down Mill Street in the rain, past the corner of Kade Street where the council had heaped the wrecked furniture in a long dune, and along the line of enamel jugs left at the standpipe for the morning.

"They put my name on the wall," said Nessa. "A woman I've never met told me I was bought. By who? By what? I've got a wage that's forty-one per cent of what it was since the closure and a father in a house I can't pay for without the same people they want to switch off." She breathed. "It's a hard thing to stand up in front of four hundred and say you won't. I'd have liked it to be easier."

"It was good."

"It wasn't *good*. It was true." She turned her head. "You've got a question."

"I have."

"Say it."

"Who can stop it, at their own place, in the time they have." Rima had her notebook out, held against her forearm, and the pen. "Anja's going to put a named officer in a chair tomorrow. I've told her I won't be it. I've got till the morning to give her something else. I think it's you. I don't think it's only you. But I don't know what you'd need."

Nessa walked on a long way without speaking. Then she held up the hand that was shaking and began to count on it, with the other hand's finger, as she would have counted the names on a launch list.

"One. It's got to reach the water. Not my log. Not a button that goes to a box that goes to a shelf. The thing that moves the gate." A finger. "Two. It's got to be mine to press. At my desk. I don't ring anyone. I don't ask. If I've got to ask, it's too late, I've rung water control for nine minutes once." A finger. "Three. Nobody's docked for pressing it. Right or wrong. If I'm wrong and I stop a launch for nothing and a man loses a connection, and he's got a boy at the clinic— that's Ruud. Sorry. It's not about Ruud. A man loses a connection, it's not on me. Not in my pay, not in my file, not in anything. If it is, I'll never press it, and nor will the next one." A finger. "Four. The boat that loses its slot isn't left to pay for it. Somebody pays. Somebody who's got a budget. It's got to be written down who." A finger. "And five."

She stopped.

"And five," said Rima.

"It's got to say *stopped*." She held the hand still now, with the five fingers open, and looked at it. "Not *acknowledged*. I never want to hear that word again. When I press it, it's got to come back and say *stopped*, in a voice that means it. And if it can't, it's got to say so. That's all."

Rima wrote it as it had been said, under the awning of a shuttered shop, in five lines, with no gloss, in the small square hand. When she had done she held the page where Nessa could see it. Nessa read it with her lips moving.

"It's a list," she said.

"It's the right list."

"It's not a plan."

"It's what the plan's got to be."

Nessa nodded, slowly. "Then give it to Anja," she said. "Before the table. I want her to read it before she sees my face."

• • •

The table was on Friday at ten, in a long grey room on the first floor of the authority's legal office, with a window onto a wall.

There were eleven chairs, and nine of them were full. On one side of the long table sat Cor Brakel in the black he had not taken off in three weeks, with his solicitor Kessel, a smooth quiet man, and a woman from the authority's counsel's office with a stack of files. Anja Rohe sat at the end with her clipboard. In the middle, opposite Brakel, alone, with a green school exercise book in front of her, sat Nessa Visser, and a little back from the table, on a chair she had carried to the wall, Rima, with a sheet of figures and a pen.

At the far end sat an insurer. He had been introduced as Matthijs Lemaire of the harbour's underwriters, a grey exact man in a grey exact suit, and he had spoken three sentences, each one a condition.

"No," said Nessa. "Write that down."

"It will be."

The terms took forty minutes to put. Interim payments for wage and compensation would go to every household of the nine, to the in-

jured, and to the two on the early boat, from the harbour fund and the underwriters, at once and without prejudice. No payment would waive any claim; every question of liability and fault was reserved. A bridging fund would open for those who had never entered the Spur but had lost work through its closing: the thirty-one agency staff of the cold store, the contract electricians, the packers, the Q5 fuel crews. It would open on the day a restricted operating plan was in force, and, at Mr Lemaire's insistence, only if the plan were independently evaluated.

"What's the date?" said Nessa.

"The date of what?"

"The plan. When's it in force."

They all looked at Anja. She had her pen in her hand. She said, "It depends on a signature. It's in hand."

"It's not in hand," said Nessa. "It's in Rima's notebook."

Anja did not smile. She held her eyes steadily on Nessa's, and Rima thought she saw something in them that was not courtesy.

"I've got your list," said Anja. "I read it at six this morning. I've read it four times."

"And?"

"And I'll come to it."

"Then I'll sign," said Nessa.

Rima's hands had been folded in her lap. She unfolded them.

"Ms Visser," said Kessel, with relief. "Thank you."

"It doesn't settle anything. It says it doesn't. It's a payment. It's for people who've got bills." She picked up the pen again. "I'm going to sign it as it stands. I'm going to sign it for me, and for the eight I've been asked to speak for who've said yes. I'm not signing for anyone who hasn't."

"Nessa," said Rima.

She had half risen from her chair. Every head turned.

"You've got no leverage after this. You've got the findings in the spring, and they've paid, and they'll say it's been dealt with. They've

bought the quiet. They've—" She stopped. She did not know what she had been going to say. The word in her mouth was *surrender*, and she looked at Nessa's face, and swallowed it.

Nessa looked at her.

"I know what it is," she said. "I'm not a fool. It's nine families and thirty-one agency people and a baker, and you're asking them to wait." She took a breath. "You're entitled to ask it. I'm not. Sit down, Rima."

Nessa signed. The pen made a small scratching sound in the quiet.

• • •

He was waiting in the corridor, by the water cooler, in a brown work jacket with a company name on the breast that had been washed so often it was no more than a ghost. He was about fifty, short and broad and sandy, with a bristle of grey on his chin and the apologetic stoop of a man who has spent his working life in crawlspaces. He had a folded paper in one hand.

"You're her," he said. "The sister. I saw you at the shed, when they did the chalk. I was on the far side of the fence."

"Yes."

"Pim Haring." He did not offer his hand. "Adina's. I mean I was her—I was the one with the tester. I had it off her, then she took it back, I rang Nessa four times." He looked at the paper. "I'm not here for that. I'm outside. They said it's a family room, in there. I'm not family. I run a firm. It's me and a boy called Tonny. We do the lamps and the pumps on the Spur, on a contract, with Brakel."

"I wanted to say something to somebody who was in there. Tonny's not been paid in three weeks. I've not been paid. It's the closure. There's no work, no invoice, nothing for Brakel's office to pay on. I've got a van with a loan on it, and the finance people are coming for it on Monday. I've rung them. They're very nice. It's a computer." He looked at Rima with harassed apology. "I'm not clever. I don't have an opinion about what happened. I just want to know if it's in there, in the thing

they're signing. The bridging. It says it starts when the plan's in force. I don't understand the second bit."

"It starts when there's an approved plan."

"And when's that?"

"I don't know," said Rima.

He nodded. "Then I'll lose the van." He unfolded the paper, and she saw that it was a final notice, with a red stripe. "It's not that I'm against waiting. I'd wait a year if it was a good idea. I've got a boy who's eighteen and a van with the finance on Monday. My bills don't care what it's for."

Rima looked at the red stripe on the paper, and at his sandy broad hand holding it. She thought of the savings account in the drawer of her desk at home, and of the salary still being paid into her account on the twenty-fifth, in full.

"I was wrong," she said.

"Sorry?"

"In there. I said she shouldn't sign. It was— I could afford it. It's easy to say wait when you're being paid." She took out her phone. "How much is the van?"

"Pim. How much?"

"I'll do it directly," she said. "I'll pay the finance on Monday. It's not a gift. It's a loan, against the bridging fund, and you'll pay me back when it opens. If it doesn't open, you don't." She put the phone away. "I want to do more than that."

She went back into the room.

"I want to say something," said Rima. "I'm not a party."

Heads turned. "I take back what I said. It was wrong, and it was— it was a luxury. I've been on full salary for three weeks. I'm going to put twenty thousand into the bridging fund. As a guarantee. If it doesn't get opened, it covers the first month for the thirty-one. Use it for the thirty-one first, and I get no say in how."

"Ms Sayegh," said Kessel, "that isn't a thing we—"

"I'm doing it."

"You're under—"

"I know what I'm under." She looked at Lemaire, at the end of the table, who had said nothing for forty minutes and was now regarding her with his head a little to one side. "Mr Lemaire. You said it opens when there's an evaluated plan. I can't give you the plan. I can give you what's in it, so far. It's a list of five things from a woman at a desk. Is there a version of that you could evaluate?"

He took off his glasses, and wiped them on a grey handkerchief, with deliberation.

"I've said," he said, "that I'd need the plan independently assessed. By someone who didn't write it."

"Ms Maaskant."

"Ms Maaskant, yes. If she'd say it was a plan." He put the glasses on. "I'd look at it. I'd look at it, with a signed interim in place and a fund in being. I'd say, if it's in my hands in a week, I could have it before my board in twenty days."

"That's a date," said Nessa.

"It's a possible date."

"It'll do."

Anja had not moved. She stood at the end of the table with her clipboard against her chest. When she spoke, it was in the compressed, unemphatic voice of the lower city drive.

"I'm a day over my own Friday," she said. "I said I'd sign today. I won't. I'll hold it till Tuesday. It's not a favour. I've got a fund, and an insurer who'll read a draft, and a woman who says she'll check it." She looked at Rima. "You've got four days. I want it written, with a name against every line. I want to know who pays for the boat."

"Yes."

"And I want to know what you're building. Not what you're refusing."

"Yes," said Rima.

It was the first time in three weeks that she had said it and known precisely what she meant.

18

The restricted plan

They built it in the dispatch room, on Saturday, round the long console, with the wall switched to white and a pot of Nessa's tea going cold on the filing cabinet.

A new chair stood at the console with the plastic still on it. "It's very comfortable," said Nessa, seeing Rima look. "I've been told. I'm saving it."

There were five of them at the console by half past eight. Nessa sat in the old chair, with the green book at her elbow. Joost sat next to her with his laptop open and no binder at all. Across from them, with a mug of the dispatch coffee he had so far declined to drink, sat Bert Kamphuis, chief of water control, a big slow grey-bearded man of sixty with hands like shovels, who had been running the harbour's gates for thirty-one years and had come, he said, to listen. Anja arrived at nine with her clipboard and sat at the end without speaking. And Rima stood, because she could think better on her feet, at the whiteboard, with a marker.

"Say it again," said Bert Kamphuis. "From the start. I'm slow."

"There's a composed sequence," said Rima. "The planning layer builds it across all the services: dispatch, contractors, water, comms. It's fast and it's good. It's what saved the lower city. We keep it." She wrote COMPOSE in the middle of the board. "But it doesn't actuate on its own when the act touches a place where people might be. It can still open the barrier and run the ferry and do the pumping, as before. That's the bounded part." She drew a ring round half the board. "Out-

side the ring is anything the map marks as *people-possible*. The gallery. The lane. The docks. The cold store floor."

"That's most of the Spur."

"It's all of the Spur."

"So you're saying nothing moves."

"I'm saying nothing moves until two people have said yes." She wrote 1 and 2, side by side. "One's the place: the person who's there. Nessa at Q6, someone at Q3, someone at the east dock. The other's the water: Bert's people, at the gate. Each sees one thing. The place sees whether the place is clear, and the water sees whether the water can do what's asked. The composition holds all of it, does the sums, and puts the question to each of them in terms they can answer."

"Is that all?" said Bert.

"There's the stop." She wrote it at the bottom, and underlined it twice. "Either of them can say no. At any time. Before the release, and after. If they say no after, the thing stops."

"Where does the stop go?"

"Straight to the gate." She turned. "That's the thing Nessa asked for. It doesn't go through the log. It goes to the equipment. It comes back and says *stopped*."

Bert Kamphuis looked at the board for some time. He drank, without noticing, a mouthful of the coffee, and made a face.

"I'd have it," he said slowly, "in principle. I'd have two releases. I've wanted a second pair of eyes on that gate for thirty years, I just didn't know whose." He put the mug down. "I'll tell you what it costs, because you won't have counted. You've slowed the whole harbour by about a fifth. A ferry priority, on the old profile, took eleven minutes from request to gate. On this, it'll take twenty-two, because two people have to answer. In a normal night that's nothing. In a night like the one we had, it's twice as long."

"That's the cost," said Rima.

"Is it? What's the benefit?"

"Nine people."

"Nine," said Bert. He did not raise his voice. "I'm only saying you'll have to put the twenty-two minutes in writing, and I'll want to be there when someone asks you what you do on the night it's the difference."

"I'll write it."

"And I want the restart." He looked at Nessa, with the slow courtesy of a man putting down a heavy thing. "If she stops it, I don't want it starting again till I say. The water has to be able to say *not yet*. And I don't want it started on the word of one person, whoever they are. If she stops it, she's got to say go as well. Both of us. Both releases, to restart."

"It's fair," said Nessa.

"I thought it might be."

"Slower to start than to stop, mind."

"So would I."

It went on for four hours. At some point Joost, whom she had last seen holding a ring binder with both arms in the rain, was at the console showing Nessa a screen on which a clean question had appeared in large type: Q6 *gallery clear of persons*? YES / NO / CANNOT SEE. He had built the third button on Friday night. "It's the one that matters," he said. "If you can't see it, you say so. It doesn't default." Nessa looked at it for a long time. She did not touch it. She said, after a while, in a voice Rima had not heard from her before, that she would have liked to have had it on the night. Then she asked if it could be made a little bigger.

At eleven Anja read the figures, in her compressed voice, not looking up. Fourteen people on three shifts: six landings, the barrier, dispatch, water control. Seven hundred and ten thousand a year from the harbour fund, which she had found by closing two other things. A stop fund of two and a half thousand per delayed crew change, a flat sum, paid within a week to the master or the employer, no questions, no deduction from anyone's pay. Written protection, signed by herself and by Brakel, that no worker would be penalised in pay or file for us-

ing a stop in good faith. Bosman's union had refused to sign it, because it did not cover the agency staff; Anja had said that was fair, and signed without them. Funded for six months; after that it would have to be argued for again.

"It's not a lot of time," said Joost.

"It's what I've got."

"And throughput?"

"Down twenty-two per cent on the Spur. I'll put it in the notice."

"Which notice?"

"The one I'm going to publish." She looked at Rima. "I want it written by you, so that I can't pretty it up. One page. It says what the harbour won't do."

• • •

Sonja Maaskant came on Monday, to the Records room in the annex, with a briefcase and a bad cold and an expression of total attentiveness.

When the professor had finished reading, she blew her nose, and laid her pencil on the table, and said, in a quiet hoarse voice, "It's a good design."

Nobody moved.

"It's a better design than I expected. Credit first. Then a question." She sniffed. "It's a small one. It's probably nothing."

"Go on," said Anja.

"Ms Visser presses the stop. It's plus eleven minutes. The feeder's open and the surge is still coming. It goes to the gate, and the gate says *stopped*." She had picked up the pencil again. "Where does the water go?"

It was a quiet question. For an instant no one spoke.

"It stops," said Rima.

"Does it?" She said it without malice. "The gate closes in about two minutes, it's a big gate. For two minutes the water in the feeder is still

moving, and there's a surge outside, coming up the channel. Where does the water that was going into the basin go?"

"Into the channel," said Joost slowly. "It's— it stays in the channel."

"Which is already high."

"Yes."

"How high does it make it?" She waited. "I don't know either. Somebody should ask the planning layer."

Joost had his laptop open already. He typed. It took less than a minute, and he read the answer aloud in a voice that went, word by word, quieter.

"*Stop at plus eleven: gate F2 closes in one hundred and forty seconds. Displaced volume raises the channel level at the lower quays by approximately thirty-one centimetres for six minutes. The ferry has cleared. The lower city quays are at the margin. Not recommended before plus fourteen. Stop at plus fourteen: displacement negligible.*"

"So there are times you can't stop it," said Anja.

"There are times you can't stop it *safely*. You can stop it. It's a gate. It'll close." Sonja Maaskant sniffed again. "You'll flood a quay. You'll have a person on a quay in the lower city with water at her ankles, because a woman in a dispatch room stopped a fill. I'm not saying it's wrong. Sometimes it would be right. It's that the design says she can stop it at any time, and she can't, not as a free act. It's got a price that depends on the minute."

"It's what I asked for," said Nessa. Her voice was quiet. "I said I wanted it to say *stopped.* I didn't say it had to be free. I just wanted it to say. If it's not, if it costs a quay, I want it to say so."

"Say it how?" said Anja.

"Before. Not after." Nessa turned. "If it's eleven minutes in and I've got my finger on it, I want it to tell me then. *Stop now: thirty-one centimetres on the lower quays. Stop at fourteen: nothing.* Let me choose with that in front of me. I've had a clear answer from this harbour once in my life, and it was 'acknowledged.' Let the next one be honest."

There was a pause. Sonja Maaskant wrote something very small at the foot of the page.

"That's an observable change," she said. "Each composed sequence has to declare, in advance, its stop points and what each costs, and the console shows it. There are committed windows where a stop has a stated price, and the person who presses it has the price in front of her." She looked up. "And the real place to stop is *before* the committed window, not inside it. The two yeses are the real stop. The stop after is a hold with consequences."

"It's the same thing," said Rima slowly. "It's the two releases. They're the commit gate."

"It is. Now it says so."

"On the page," said Anja. "How do I write that? I can't tell a woman in Q6 it's a stop that costs a quay."

"You tell her what it does," said Sonja Maaskant. "That's all you're obliged to say."

"I'll approve it," said Sonja Maaskant. "Conditionally. There are three conditions. On paper, please."

"Say them," said Anja.

"One. Stop points and committed windows declared in every sequence and displayed to the officer. Two. A live test on the real gate, with a real stop, in water only, with no person in the footprint, before any operation with a person in it. I want to see it say *stopped*, and I want to see what it does to the channel. Three. The staffing funded for all of the first six months, in writing, with a named budget. Not a promise. A line. Because this design works, and it will stop working the first time somebody says it costs too much to have a woman at every landing."

"It's funded," said Anja.

"Then it'll say so."

It took the rest of the day. At four Anja stood at the long table in the Records room, in a navy jacket, with a single sheet of paper before her. It was the notice. It was a short one. It said, in plain type, and she

had rewritten it three times so that it said nothing it did not mean, what the restricted harbour would and would not do.

From the date of this notice the Outer Spur will operate under restricted rules. These are the limits.

No automated sequence will fill, drain or move water in any space marked as possibly occupied unless two people, one at the place and one at the water, have each said yes.

Either of them may stop it. The stop will go to the equipment and will say what it has done. It will say what it costs.

No worker will be penalised for stopping an operation in good faith. Any vessel delayed by a stop will be paid.

The harbour will move more slowly. We estimate twenty-two per cent less on the Spur. We will say each month what that has cost.

This arrangement is funded for six months. It may be wrong. We will publish what we learn, and we will publish it when it is unwelcome.

She signed it. She did it at the table, standing, with the pen she had used on the quay, and the date beside it in her upright capitals. When she had done, she looked at it for a while. Then she held it out to Rima.

"Read it," she said. "Tell me if it's a lie."

Rima read it. She read it as she would have read a lock procedure, line by line, with her finger under the words. She stopped at the fifth, and read it again, and said that there was one thing. It said *twenty-two*. But the harbour had never been that precise about itself.

"It's an estimate," said Anja. "It says so."

"It says *we estimate*." She handed it back. "It's all right."

Anja nodded slowly. She picked up the page, and held it against her chest, in the way she held her clipboard.

"It won't be popular," she said. "The lower city will say I'm slowing the bread. The ferry crews will say I'm paying for the wrong thing. The union will say it's not enough. The residents will say it's the machine, still. I've got four hundred people who'll be angry at it by Friday." She

looked at the notice. “I can stand behind it. I don’t know that it’s right.”

“It isn’t right,” said Sonja Maaskant, with her handkerchief to her nose. “It’s sufficient.”

• • •

Lammers rang at six.

Rima took it in the corridor, with her back to the wall. He was calling from the shed, and she could hear the plates being moved in the background, a deep iron note like a bell struck underwater.

“I’ve done the sums,” he said. “For the live test. You’ll want a date.”

“Go on.”

“The test is a fill and a stop. On the real gate, in the water, with the Spur empty. I’d do it in nine days. If it passes, the plan’s in force. If it doesn’t, we fix it.” A pause. “And the recovery, Ms Sayegh. I’ve been through the tide tables again. It’s still the morning of the fourteenth. Slack water’s at eleven minutes to seven, and sunrise is six-fifty. It’s a sliver. I’ve got about eighty minutes, and nearly half of it’s in the grey before the light’s up.”

“It’s daylight.”

“It’s daylight if you’re generous. I’ve asked Ms Stoica. She says she’s generous.”

She wrote it down in the lighthouse notebook, on a clean page, standing against the wall. *Test: 9 days. Recovery: Sat the 14th, slack 06:49, light 06:50.* She looked at the numbers, and thought of a chair at the head of a stair, and a woman in a coat.

“What’s the risk?” she said.

“The roof at the back,” said Oscar Lammers. “The one I can’t see. It’s held for forty years, it’s been standing in water for three and a half weeks, and I’d say it’ll hold. I’ve a very good feeling about it. I’ve had good feelings about roofs before.” He cleared his throat. “If it’s moved, we’ll know when we’re in it.”

In the Records room, through the open door, she could see Anja at the long table. The director stood with the notice in one hand and a pen in the other. She was writing something at the foot of a calendar that had been pinned to the brown paper over the window, in her upright capitals, small, in the box for the fourteenth. Rima could not read it from the corridor. It was a single line. She watched her put the cap on the pen.

Part Four

The people beside the water

19

Preparation

She had been given a yellow bib on Thursday with the word STAIR printed across the back in black, and by Friday afternoon she was beginning to feel that it was the first piece of clothing in her life that had told the truth about her.

The stair at Q6 had been shored for nine days. It no longer looked like a stair. It looked like something built inside one. Fourteen raking props of timber leaned on the old brickwork from the landing to the foot, each on its own steel shoe with a wedge and a chalk mark, and three heavy walers ran across them at knee height, bolted through the wall, with a pair of steel rails laid on top, bright where the trolley wheels had been tried. A plank walkway ran down one side, a hand's breadth from the rails, with a lamp every four metres on a lead taped along the rope. The hoarding at the head had been taken down and replaced by a green awning on four poles. Under it, out of the wind, stood a small wooden chair.

She checked the props one at a time, with a boy of nineteen walking behind her with a mallet.

"Tap," she said.

Wout Pauw tapped. He was a long, lean, pale-haired apprentice with a boy's wrists and a man's patient hands, who had been assigned to Lammers' shoring crew in the second week and had been assigned to her, as far as she could tell, by nobody. He had a pencil behind his ear and a carpenter's ticket in his pocket with a stamp on it. He put the mallet's head against the third prop up from the landing and

struck once, short and light, and she heard the sound the timber made, a low flat dry note with no ring in it, and Wout said, “Spruce. It’s taken water. It’s about eighteen per cent.”

“Eighteen.”

“A bit more. I’d say nineteen on the side that’s against the wall.” He said it without emphasis, as he might have told her the time. “It’s fine for the load. It’s a bit tired. I want a spare.”

“There’s a spare at the top.”

“Quite. I’ve put a mark on it.”

She went on down the flight, and he tapped, and each prop gave back its note. Some rang and some thudded. She could see every tread. She could count the load. The lower flight was steeper than the upper, as she had told them in the shed, and it would have to carry a stretcher party of six, four at the poles and two on the rope, with a stretcher and a load between them, in step, on a surface that had been wet for six weeks. She had worked the figures on Tuesday. The shoring would take nine hundred kilos. The party would put on, with a margin, five hundred and sixty. She had wanted the margin to be larger, and Lammers had said it could not be, and she had checked it again on Wednesday and found that he was right.

“What’s the tide doing tomorrow?” said Wout.

“Slack water at ten to seven.”

“Is that the lowest?”

She stopped on the landing. “No.”

“I thought slack was the lowest. When the water’s gone out as far as it goes.”

“Low water’s the lowest. Slack’s when it stops moving.” She turned round on the step. “It can stop anywhere. At the bottom of a neap it stops pretty low, and it stops for a good while, and that’s why we’re using it. It’s not that it’s empty. It’s that it isn’t going anywhere, and a man can lean on a plate.” She heard how it sounded and did not apologise. “It’s the stop that matters. Not the level.”

He took the pencil from behind his ear and wrote on the inside of his left forearm, in small clear capitals, *SLACK = STOPPED. NOT LOW.* He looked at it. "I'll remember that."

"Write it on paper."

"It's on me. I won't lose me."

She went down to the foot of the stair, and he came after her with the mallet, and they stood in the gallery under the lamps. She had not been into it since the dive tent. The front half was dry. The pumps had run for six weeks and the floor, laid long ago in great flags of grey stone, was beginning to show its own colour, a pale dull blue, under a skin of dried silt. The benches had been taken out and stacked in the lane. The kettle had gone. The lamp on its bracket had been taken down, with great care, and wrapped, and put somewhere safe. The hooks on the wall had been left. They were empty now, five iron hooks in a row, and under the last of them somebody had chalked a small cross.

At the far end, forty metres off, in the light of two floods on tripods, stood the bulkhead. Four of its five leaves were in place. They had been hung over three nights, one by one, on the twelve anchors drilled into the stone at the mouth of the rear passage, and they stood in a wall of dull grey steel from floor to roof, with a rubber seal between each, a gap at the bottom where the fifth would go. Beyond it, in the dark, nothing moved. She could hear the water. It was a low continuous sound, like a large animal breathing in its sleep.

Oscar Lammers stood in front of the gap with his glasses on his forehead and his drawing board under his arm, looking at it as at a friend about to leave.

"Don't say it," he said, without turning round. "I've been looking at it since noon."

"I wasn't going to."

"You were going to say it's a very big hole." He tilted his head. "Leaf five goes in there. It's the one that has to go in last. It's the one that closes the passage. The other four, I've been able to try before they're

hung. This one I try at the slack, and it's in or it isn't." He rubbed his nose. "It's a good plate. It's four hundred and ten kilos of the best I could get. And it's sitting on a sill I haven't seen."

"Haven't seen?"

"I know where it is. De Roo had it on sheet fifteen. Sietske's tape's had it twice. They agree to within ten millimetres." He took the glasses off, and held them up to the light, and put them on again. "That's what worries me. They agree. De Roo measured the level of the silt. Sietske measured the level of the silt. Nobody's measured the stone. It's been under a metre of mud since before I was born." He shrugged. "I've got a little suction dredge. It's allowed fifteen minutes in the sequence, to clear the sill before the plate goes down. I expect it to find the stone where the tape says it is. I've a very good feeling about it."

"You've had good feelings before."

"Roofs," said Lammers, with dignity. "I've had good feelings about roofs. Sills are a different thing. And there's a spare on the second trolley, a metre and a half of the fabricator's offcut with its flange drilled and a gasket stuck to it, for if the stone's not where it ought to be. They wouldn't take it back, and I can't throw good steel away."

She looked at the gap. It was two and a half metres wide, and dark, and floored with a smooth grey skin of mud in which the marks of Sietske's boots, three weeks old, were still faintly visible, like footprints in new snow. She did not say anything. She thought, with the part of her mind that went on without being asked, *has anyone seen the stone*? And she did not say it, because it was Lammers' sill and Lammers' plate, and because she had said the same sort of sentence once before to a man in a raincoat and been told it was not hers.

"Your brother found something in the trolley," said Lammers.

"Did he?"

"I had it read to him on Monday. The rail drawing. I thought he might know. He said, 'What's the nosing on those lower treads?' I said I didn't know. He said, 'It's bevelled. It's about eight degrees. I've been

up and down them a thousand times. Your wheels'll climb it.'" Lammers looked pleased, and rueful, and a little startled. "I went and looked. He was right. I'd have found it on the day, with a leaf on the stair and a diver behind it. I've put a lip on the rails. Look."

She looked. At the foot of the lower flight, on each rail, a short upstand of bright steel had been welded on an inch inside the wheel. She would never have seen it if she had not been told.

"I've asked Brakel how I can pay him," said Lammers. "They've never had to pay a continued person for anything. It's with their lawyers. It's been with them since Tuesday. I've told them if they can't find a way I'll find one, but I want it done in a manner that won't make him feel like an exhibit."

"He'll hate being paid in a manner," said Rima.

"Yes. I thought he might."

• • •

The test had been nine days ago, and it had gone as well as a thing of its kind could. She had not been in the room. She had been told, at second hand, by Joost, who had been so pleased that he had talked for forty minutes and then stopped in the middle of a word, and by Nessa, who had said only that it said *stopped.*

It had been a plain thing. A real fill, on the real gate, with the Spur emptied of everyone but Joost's cables, and a woman in a gatehouse with her finger over a button. At plus seven, with the water going in, she had pressed it. The gate had closed in one hundred and forty seconds. The channel at the lower quays had risen six centimetres and fallen again. And a voice, a calm one, which Joost had spent a week persuading the planning layer to use, had said in the gatehouse, to the room, to the empty Spur, to nobody, *Stopped. Channel plus six. Stop point honoured.* The woman at the console had sat still. Then she had said, to nobody in particular, "I didn't like how much I liked that." It had gone into the log.

Sonja Maaskant had signed the evaluation on the Wednesday. The bridging fund had opened on the Thursday. Pim Haring's van had not been repossessed, and his apprentice, a thin cheerful boy called Tonny, had been paid in full, in an envelope, by a woman from Brakel's office who had cried while she did it and had been unable to say why.

The woman at the console was called Tessel Roos. She was twenty-nine, a water control operator with a ginger plait and a thermos, and Rima found her at six in the gatehouse, at the mouth of the channel, with a mug of soup in front of her and her feet on a bar. It was a square room, with a long window onto the water and a bank of screens. One of them showed, in a clear grey picture, a patch of dark water and a wall of weedy stone, and a thing like a great iron door, hung at its top on two bright pins.

"That's the tide gate," said Tessel. "Hanging on the outside of the basin wall. It's Ms Terhorst's." She said it as one says the name of a saint. "It's the only bit of the thing that's never needed fixing."

"I've seen the drawing."

"Have you? She had it read to us at the training. Forty of us, in a room." She nodded at the screen. "It opens by itself. When the basin level's above the channel. We'll close the feeder at ten past six, and the basin'll start to fall, and the flap'll lift, and it'll go to about eleven degrees by twenty past, if the model's right. You'll see the arm come up. That's the counterweight, on the end."

On the screen, the counterweight, a great hatched block of iron on the end of a long arm, hung against the stone. It was still.

"I'll be watching that one," said Tessel. "I've got the water release, with Mr Kamphuis. If it doesn't lift, or it lifts wrong, the basin won't fall as the model says, and the divers' level'll be out. I've got the stop." She looked into her soup. "I've never pressed it, outside the test. I'll tell you what I'd like. I'd like to never have to."

"Does it ever hang?"

"It hangs." She said it so simply that Rima looked up. "Four degrees, sometimes, for a few seconds. It always goes in the end."

She looked at the screen. It showed her the iron door, and the dark water, and the clean bright pins of the hinge. She remembered a voice saying *the only part of the design I would defend in front of my mother.* She had a sudden sharp wish to put her hand on it.

• • •

Captain Roelien Reitsma was at the Spur gate at four, with a box of cinnamon buns.

She was a broad brisk woman of fifty-five, in a navy jersey and a woollen hat, who had brought the coaster *Anna Sluis* into Meren on thirty-one hundred and twelve occasions, by her own count, and who had been told on Wednesday that on Saturday morning, for the first time in her career, her ship's passage would be governed by a notice. She handed the box to the gate staff, who looked at it with the wary courtesy of men who had been told not to accept gifts and could not bring themselves to refuse. Then she turned to the nearest person in a high-vis, which was Rima, in a yellow bib that said STAIR.

"You'll do," she said. "I'm told the channel's shut from a quarter past six to ten past seven."

"Yes."

"And I'm booked out at twenty past." She had a voice that had been used across water. "I've got a relief crew coming down on the nine-twelve train from the north. Six of them. If I'm not out by twenty past, I'm not alongside, the relief's standing on a quay with six bags, and I've got six people who've been at sea for nineteen days. And my Thursday berth's the one thing I'd mind losing over it." She looked at Rima's face. "I'm not objecting. I want you to know that. I know why it's shut. I've been told. I've read the notice."

"Which part?"

"The part about paying for it." She took off the woollen hat and ran a hand through her hair. "I'll tell you what I think of that. I've been in this harbour thirty-one years, and in all of them nobody's paid a captain for a thing the harbour decided. It's the weather, or it's the traffic,

or it's an operational reason. I've lost a tide before. I've lost three. I've sent the invoices. I've never got a penny." She put the hat on again. "I'll believe it when I've been paid."

"It's two and a half thousand."

"It's two and a half *thousand*," said Reitsma. "My real loss, if I'm late for that train, is nearer eleven. A hotel for six, a berth penalty, a night's dues. It's a flat sum. It's not the cost." She paused. "Put that somewhere."

"I'll put it in my notebook."

"Will you?"

Rima took out the lighthouse notebook, in front of the gate staff and the box of buns, and wrote it down. The captain watched her with an expression of deep suspicion that gradually became something else.

"Thank you," she said, and took a bun from the box, and ate it, and went back to her ship. Out on the channel the afternoon ferry gave its two short blasts for the Westgate bend, a sound so ordinary that nobody at the gate turned a head.

A small neat man in a pilot service jacket stood by the gate with a clipboard. He had said nothing throughout, and now said, to the air, mildly, "She's very good, Reitsma. A bit direct." He wrote something on the clipboard and went off to look at the barrier.

• • •

In the canteen, at ten that night, there were seventy breakfasts to be made, and for four hours Rima did what she was told.

It was a different place from the one she had known in the first week. The long tables were bare and scrubbed, and the pass was lit. On the big range onions were frying in butter in six pans, and in the oven a hundred and forty rolls were rising, and the shed smelled of caraway and warm bread and smoke. Femke stood in the middle of it in her grey apron with a wooden spoon, giving orders in a low unhur-

ried voice to three people in white. She looked at Rima as she came in, and nodded, and said, "Tray," and Rima took the tray.

It was the best thing she did that day. She did not think. She carried, and stacked, and counted spoons, and was told twice that she was holding a knife wrong and once that she was not to touch the eggs. At eleven a tall boy from the fabricator's came in for tea and stood at the end of the pass looking at the rolls until Femke gave him one without a word.

He ate it standing, with his mouth full, and said, because he was nineteen and meant it, "It's good, what you're doing. Everybody says. They say you're a saint."

Femke had a tray of rolls in her bare hands. She had taken it out of the oven a moment before, and she did not put it down. Rima, at her elbow, saw the heat go into her palms and saw her not feel it.

"I'm not," said Femke.

"I only meant—"

"I know what you meant." Her voice was level. "I'm making breakfast because it's the one thing I know how to do with my hands, and I can't sit in a room. If one more person tells me it's kind I'll put it in the bin." She looked down at the tray. "The registry rang this morning to ask if I'd like to talk to someone. They said it was always available. They were so nice. A woman said I had every right to feel whatever I felt." She laughed, once, with no breath in it. "What would I do with the right?"

The boy had gone the colour of the rolls. He put the half-eaten one down on the pass, very carefully, as if it might go off. Rima took the tray out of Femke's hands. The skin of both palms was bright red and beginning to shine, and Femke looked at them with mild interest, and then her shoulders went.

She turned to the tap and put her hands under it and stood with her back to the room, and the water ran, and her back shook, and she made no sound at all. The second began to say something, and Rima shook her head. Nobody said the right thing. There was no right thing.

The roll sat on the pass with a bite out of it, and the onions went on frying in six pans, and it went on for a good while. When it stopped, she turned off the tap, and dried her hands on her apron, and looked at the clock.

"Tray," she said, to the range, and Rima, who still had it, held it out.

At half past eleven she took a smaller tray out of the oven. It held a dozen, set apart from the rest, in a neat rank, with a pale shine on each, and each had a fine scatter of seed across the top. Femke looked at them for a moment. Then she put them in a paper bag, folded the top over twice, and set them on the shelf by the door with the mugs.

"They're for Ioana Stoica," she said. "She hasn't asked for anything. I'm making them anyway. Don't tell her."

"I won't."

"She'll eat one at six and put the rest in her pocket." Femke wiped her hands. "That's what I'd do. I'd eat one and carry the rest around all day as if they were a thing I'd been told to hold." She did not look round. "Dani asked me to say something to you. He asked yesterday."

Rima kept her hands on the tray.

"He said to say that it's not a test. He's not going to be on the line. He's not going to be told what you see. He'd like you to ring him after. Once. If he doesn't pick up, don't ring again that day." She did look round then. "It's what he asked. I said I'd say it exactly."

"Thank you."

"I'm not doing you a favour."

"No."

"Good." She turned back to the range. "You're stacking those the wrong way. The big ones go on the bottom."

She went out to the Spur at midnight. The sky had cleared and the cold came down with it, a hard star-bright cold, and the harbour lay below the causeway in the light of its own lamps. She could see the barrier, and the Spur like a bent arm, and the long channel between with a pale slick on it. She could hear the winch on the east leaf, a long way off across the water, running a bearing that was flat by a

semitone. It had been flat for a year. Nobody had mended it. She had put it on a list.

At the head of the stair, under the green awning, the little wooden chair stood in the light of a single lamp. She had asked that it be brought from the canteen. Somebody had put a folded blanket on the seat, and a flask beside it, and a tarpaulin over both, weighted at the corners with bricks. She went down to look at the lower flight once more, and tapped a prop, and listened, and came up again.

She lay for a while on a camp bed in the dive tent, listening to the generator. At five, she got up and went out to look at the sky.

It had begun to lighten, faintly, over the east, in a long grey wash at the foot of the dark. It was less than dawn, a sort of rumour of it. Below her, in the stair, a lamp burned. Somebody, somewhere, was working at something with a mallet, in a steady slow tap she could feel in her teeth. She stood in the cold and listened to it, until a voice came up out of the dark of the stair, young and hoarse.

"Is that you? The prop at the landing's gone to seventeen."

"Seventeen's fine," said Rima. "Go to bed."

"You go."

Neither of them did.

20

The first stop

By half past five the Spur was full of people doing small things, and it was, Rima thought, the loveliest she had seen it.

The sky had begun to pale along the eastern wall of the harbour, though it was still dark overhead, and the lamps along the quay were lit under it, a long yellow string, as though somebody had forgotten to turn them off. The air smelled of cold iron and coffee and of the warm yeast smell that came up the causeway from the van where Femke's second was handing out rolls from a crate. The dive team's trucks stood in their row. A generator hummed. Along the lane, in twos and threes, in their bibs and hard hats, with their breath going up, stood perhaps sixty people who had each been told they were needed and had come an hour early.

There were the divers, at the head of the stair, in their drysuits, with their helmets under their arms like tired knights. There were Lammers' crew, at the trolley, with their gloves on. A pump man was lying on his back under a trailer with a spanner. Two paramedics from the registry sat on the tailgate of a white van, drinking tea out of a flask, in the patient silence of people who had done this before and did not need to talk about it. A boy of eighteen, Pim Haring's Tonny, in a clean boiler suit, walked up and down the lane with a coil of lead over his shoulder, looking for something to be useful at. And at the end of the quay, in a patch of yellow light, an old man in a hat sat in a wheelchair under a blanket with a stripe, pushed there by a tired young woman in a nurse's tunic, who had been told he could watch

from a distance, and had agreed, after some argument, on a hundred metres.

"He's here to see the boats," said Nessa. She had come out of the Q6 post for a minute, to look at the day. "I said, Dad, it's five in the morning. He said, you only get the one chance to see the water go down."

She had on her borrowed oilskin. The sling had gone a fortnight ago, but she still held her arm a little forward of her body, as one holds something that has been broken and mended, and she had a new bib, a blue one, with INTERFACE across the back. The post at Q6 was a small prefab hut that had gone up at the lane's edge in the last week, with a window, a console, and a chair. It was a black chair, on a five-star base, and the plastic was off.

"You're sitting in it," said Rima.

"I've been told it's comfortable." Nessa looked at her sidelong. "It is. I don't like it."

The sequence began at ten to six, when Nessa's release went in.

Rima heard it on the loop. She had a small radio in her ear, tuned to the stair channel, and another on her bib tuned to the operations loop, which was a quiet murmur of the working voices of the harbour: the dispatcher at the console, Joost's voice, low, reading off a checklist; Bert Kamphuis, in a deep unhurried rumble; a clipped female voice at the gatehouse, which was Tessel Roos's. There was a small chime. Nessa's voice said, "Q6 place, release. Gallery has divers, six, and no one else. Lane clear. Q6 releases." A pause. "Say it back." And a calm dry voice, the voice that Joost had spent a week persuading, said, Q6 *release received. Gallery occupied by six, diving party. Occupied, not clear. Sequence* S-1 *may proceed with divers present on conditions.* Then Tessel, in the gatehouse: "Water release. Basin level, feeder, tide gate, all as per. Water releases." And the voice said, *Both releases received. Sequence* S-1 *begins.*

It was a small sound, a chime and a sentence. She stood in the cold at the head of the stair with her bib on, and found that her hands had closed.

The sequence was simple to say. At ten past six the feeder gate F2, which fed the basin, would be closed and held. The tide gate would be left to do what it had been drawn to do. The basin, no longer fed, would fall with the tide, and the level in the passage behind the gallery would fall with it. By twenty past six the arm of the tide gate should be lifting, to about eleven degrees, and the level should be dropping at a rate the model had calculated to three places. At a quarter past six the barrier would close, and the channel with it, to stop the tide sloshing. At ten to seven the water would stop moving. At ten past seven the barrier would reopen and the channel with it, and the ships would go.

For twenty minutes nothing happened, in the sense in which a thing happens in a film. The light came up. The lamps went off along the quay one at a time as the daylight reached them. At the head of the stair, under the green awning, a woman in a navy coat sat on a small wooden chair with a flask between her feet.

Ioana Stoica had arrived at twenty past five. She had come on foot along the causeway, alone, with her hands in her pockets and a long grey scarf wound round her neck and a small amber tag on her lapel, the kind the registry gave to people who had asked to be unreachable for a day, and Rima, at the awning, had said nothing. She had pointed to the chair. The woman had looked at it, and at the blanket on the seat, and the tarpaulin, and the flask with its lid screwed down tight, and she had sat down at once, like someone who had been told to, and put her hands on her knees. She had not said thank you. She had said, after a minute, "There's a roll in the bag. I can smell it," and Rima had gone to the shelf and brought the paper bag, folded twice at the top, and Ioana had taken it without comment and eaten one. Slowly, to the end. She had put the rest in her coat pocket and sat looking at the stair.

Pim Haring had come at a quarter to six and stood a few paces behind her in his work jacket, with his cap in his hand. He did not speak either.

At six minutes past six, the voice on the operations loop said, *F2 closing.*

Rima went to the lane's edge, where Wout had set up a pair of binoculars on a tripod. She put her eye to them. The basin was out of sight behind the quay. But at the Spur's elbow, two hundred metres off, on the face of the wall, she could see it: the tide gate, a grey slab of iron hanging on its two bright pins, with the long arm and the counterweight at its upper end, like the arm of a patient scale. It hung still against the weedy stone. She could see the dark water at its foot and the small bright curl where the channel went by.

"Is that it?" said Wout.

"That's it."

"It looks like it's been there for ever."

"It has."

The light grew. At ten past she heard on the loop a small hiss and a clean voice: *F2 closed. Basin no longer fed.* At twelve past: *Basin level beginning to fall.* At a quarter past: Bert's rumble, saying that the barrier was going to the close, and a long iron groan, across the harbour, as the leaves came round.

She watched the arm.

It moved. It lifted, slightly, perhaps a degree, and there was a small dark gap at the foot of the slab, and the water at it flickered. Then it stopped. She held the glass. The arm hung where it was, a hair above the stone, at an angle she could have covered with her thumbnail.

"It's going," said Wout.

"It's going," said Rima. She had not moved. She counted. At sixteen minutes past six it was at three degrees. At seventeen, at three. She heard, in her ear, a woman's voice on the operations loop, low, saying, "Gate indication. Two, three degrees. Model says eight."

"It hangs sometimes," said another voice. It was Bert's, from a long way off. "Give it a minute."

"I've given it two."

Rima moved the glass. She had a sudden clear sight of the whole dark slab, and the hinge, and the arm, and the counterweight, and it was not moving at all.

"Tessel?" It was Joost. "I have the console. If you want it, you have a stop. Now. It says: *Stop now, no cost to the basin. Channel hold extends to at least 07:55. Vessel Anna Sluis, passage 07:20, will lose its window.* Next commit is at 06:30."

There was a long, small silence. In the middle of it, Rima heard, plainly, someone breathe in.

"It's four degrees," said Tessel Roos. Her voice had thinned. "It's hung before. It always goes."

"I know," said Joost.

"It's a woman with a crew change."

"I know."

"I've got—" She stopped. "Nessa?"

"Your call, love." It was Nessa, from the Q6 post, gently, as she might have spoken to someone on the edge of a cold sea. "It's yours. I'll not say a thing. I'd say the same if you pressed it and I'd say the same if you didn't."

"That's not helpful."

"I know it's not."

The voice on the loop said nothing at all. It was waiting. Rima, on the lane, with her eye to the glass, saw the slab, and the small dark gap, and the lifted arm, and did not breathe.

"Stop," said Tessel.

There was a chime.

Stopped, said the voice, calm and clear, in a gatehouse and a prefab and a dispatch room and, in a small plastic bud, in the ear of a woman in a yellow bib. *Sequence S-1 held at step six. Basin level falling at reduced rate. Channel hold extends. Vessel Anna Sluis, 07:20, will lose its*

window. Stop recorded: T. Roos, 06:19. Delay cost attributed to the harbour fund. A pause. *Restart requires both releases.*

It was four minutes past the quarter hour, and the first light had come up over the edge of the wall.

• • •

It was a long twenty-two minutes. Rima would remember it as made up entirely of people being reasonable.

The divers waited at the head of the stair in their drysuits. Lammers came up from the foot of the stair, two at a time, with his glasses on his forehead and an expression of controlled anguish, and said that every minute they spent was a minute off the slack and could he be told if it was going to be a long one. Bert Kamphuis came on the loop and said that he did not know, that he did not know why the gate hung, and that he would not release the water until he did. "If it's a hinge, I want to see it," he said. "If it's a stone, I want to see it. I won't say go on a four-degree gate." Joost read out numbers. Nessa said that she was not releasing the place until she had heard what the water had to say.

It was Sietske who sent the boat. She had a little grey inflatable at the Spur's steps, with an outboard, and a young diver named Jurre who was the lightest of her team, and she put them in it without ceremony and sent them round the elbow to the gate with a radio and a torch. Rima watched through the glass. She saw the small boat slide across the water in the new light, a grey dot on a grey sheet, and stop at the foot of the wall, and the diver, in his orange, put his arm over the side and then his head. He was under for two minutes.

"Water control," said a voice, young and shaky and clear, "it's Jurre. I've got a— there's a bit of metal. I think it's a bit of rail. From the old quay, it's— it's been in the storm. It's jammed. It's between the counterweight and the wall."

Nobody spoke.

"It's about a metre. It's a stanchion. It's not— it's not the hinge. The hinge is fine. The hinge is clean." He seemed to have forgotten to be afraid. "It's unbelievable. It's just wedged. It's been there since the first night."

"Can you shift it?"

"I think I can."

It took him fourteen minutes. Rima stood with her eye to the glass and watched the small orange figure going over and under at the wall's foot, and a long grey bar of iron coming slowly into the light, turning, slowly. It came away at nineteen minutes to seven. She saw the arm give. It did not lift gently. It moved with a kind of clean shock, like a sleeper waking, and rose up to eight degrees, to ten, to eleven, with the counterweight swinging, and she heard from a long way off a heavy iron sigh, and the flap came open, and a long ribbon of brown water went out under it, sliding, into the channel.

"It's going," said Tessel Roos. Her voice cracked on it. "It's going. Eleven degrees. It's right."

"It's right," said Bert. "Water releases."

"Q6 releases," said Nessa.

Both releases received, said the voice. *Sequence S-1 resumes at step six. Basin level falling. Slack water expected at 07:03. Window available 64 minutes.*

It was as plain as that. It took, in the end, twenty-two minutes, and it was done.

"It's not my hinge," said somebody in the loop. It was Joost. He sounded dazed. "Ms Terhorst's hinge. It's— it was a bit of quay. I'll tell her."

"Do," said Bert. "She'll want to know."

• • •

She was at the head of the stair when Ioana Stoica put her hand on her sleeve.

"Is it going wrong?" said Ioana.

She had not moved from the chair. She sat upright with her hands on her knees, and her face under the scarf was white. She had been listening to the loop on a small borrowed earpiece for twenty minutes, and she had said nothing, and now she turned her head and looked up at Rima with a clear, unemphatic gaze.

"No," said Rima. "Somebody stopped it. It's what it's for."

"Because it wasn't right."

"Because she wasn't sure. It turned out to be a bit of iron."

"And if she'd been wrong? If it had been nothing?"

"Then it would have cost a woman a train, and she'd have been right to."

Ioana looked at her. She looked for a long time. Then she opened her coat pocket, and took out the paper bag with the folded top, and took from it the second roll, and broke it in half. She held out one half.

"I won't eat it," she said. "I've got a stomach like a stone. You have it."

Rima took it. It was warm. It was dense and sweet and spiced, with a hard clean taste of caraway under the crust, and she ate it standing at the head of the stair in a yellow bib, in the cold light, and did not say anything, because there was nothing at all to say.

• • •

The call came to Anja on the Spur gate at twenty-three minutes past six.

Rima was thirty metres from the gate, at the head of the lane, with the open loop in one ear, and she heard most of it; the rest came afterwards, from two people who had been closer. Anja Rohe had been standing at the gate since six with her clipboard and her Thermos and the expression of a woman at the end of a long plank. When the stop went in, she had put the Thermos down on a bollard. She had listened to all twenty-two minutes on a small radio, without moving, with her head a little bowed. And at twenty-three past, in the middle of it, a neat small man in a pilot service jacket had come up beside her with

his clipboard, and had said in a low pleasant voice, as one might remark on the weather, that the stop was going to cost them the *Anna Sluis*.

"Noted," said Anja.

"She's Reitsma. She's the one who made the fuss. The notice, and so on." Floris Pot, who was pilotage manager and had been so for eleven years, spoke softly. He was a man who did not like to be overheard being sensible. "Her Thursday slot's a tight one, as it happens. It's a tight one. I could always find a reason. It wouldn't be said. It would be understood." He looked at his clipboard. "It's an old arrangement. We've always found it keeps things orderly."

Anja said, "No."

"I'm only saying—"

"Heard. She's lost a passage because my harbour stopped. The operator did right. If I move her Thursday slot for it, I've told every woman at every landing what a stop is worth, and I've done it in a way I can deny. It's the thing I said I wouldn't do. It's the one thing in the notice that's mine." She picked the Thermos up again. "Her Thursday stays. Put it on the board. Put it in writing and send it to her."

"Ms Rohe—"

"I'll ring her now."

She did. She did it standing at the Spur gate with a phone to her ear, in the cold, in full view of a dozen people, and she spoke into it in the compressed unemphatic voice that Rima had learned on the road down Kade Hill. "Captain Reitsma. It's Anja Rohe. The channel hold's extended. You've lost your twenty past seven. It's because the tide gate hung, and the operator stopped the sequence, and she was right. You won't be alongside by ten to nine."

A pause. She listened.

"Yes. The stop fund pays two and a half automatically. It'll be in your account by Friday. That's the flat sum. The rest, the real cost, you'll send me an invoice for, today, with the hotel and the dues and the berth, and I'll sign it myself. I'll sign it on Monday morning. Your

Thursday slot's not moved. It'll be on the board in ten minutes." A longer pause. "I know. I'd like it in writing. You'll have it. You'll have it by seven."

She held the phone a moment longer. Then she said, "I read the notice too. I wasn't sure myself." And she rang off.

It was eleven minutes to seven. The light was well up. She stood on the gate in her navy jacket and looked out over the channel, at the grey coaster sitting at her anchorage off the Westgate bend with her bows to the tide, and the little group of people on her deck, a long way off, in their orange. Nobody moved on her. She sat, and waited. It was exactly as quiet as it had been, and a good deal longer.

At ten past seven the barrier did not open. It would not, now, for fifty minutes. And from the channel, in the pearly morning, over the water, from a ship that had been told she would sail at twenty past, there came three long blasts of a horn.

It was a deep sound. It went across the harbour like something put down on a table. It did not sound angry. It was too long for that. It was an ordinary, sullen, seamanlike note, such as a ship might sound to say that she was there, and that she had noticed, and that she would be sending an invoice. It was in the loop, and in the lane, and at the head of the stair, and it was heard by the divers and the stretcher party, and by an old man in a wheelchair at a hundred metres, who turned his head and said clearly to his daughter, "That's the *Anna Sluis.* She's got a short horn. That's her telling them."

Anja stood and heard it out to the end. She did not look away from the water. When the third blast had died, she wrote something on her clipboard, and under it, in her upright hand, a time.

In the Q6 post, at the console, Nessa Visser had put a hand on Tessel Roos's shoulder. The young woman had come across from the gatehouse a quarter of an hour ago, white as paper, to stand beside the chair and be told something. She had said very little. She had her thermos in both hands.

"It was right," said Nessa. "It'd have been right if it'd been nothing."

"It wasn't nothing."

"It wouldn't have mattered. I've pressed a button once in my life that said *acknowledged*, and I've waited six weeks for someone to press one that said *stopped*. You've done it. It's on the record. That's all there is to it. You can be sick, if you want. Outside."

"I don't want to."

"No," said Nessa. "It passes."

On the console, the small printer by the window hummed, and put out a slip. It was a short one. *06:19. Stop, step six, S-1. Operator: T. ROOS (water). Cause: tide-gate indication hung 4°. Delay: ANNA SLUIS, 07:20. Payer: harbour fund. Authorised by: A. ROHE, 06:29.* Nessa tore it off, and read it, and folded it in four, and put it into the breast pocket of her oilskin, as one puts away a ticket for a journey one has not yet taken.

21

The gallery

At three minutes past seven the water stopped.

Rima heard it on the loop before she saw anything: the dry voice saying *Slack*, and Bert's rumble saying *Slack*, *confirmed*, and the little pause in the whole harbour, as if a great many people had put down what they were carrying. At the head of the stair the divers stood up. At the foot, in the light of the floods, Lammers took off his glasses and put them on again. Wout, beside the trolley, with a brake-lever in each fist, looked at the arm of his own watch, and then at the boards.

"Leaf five," said Lammers, in the voice of a man at a launch. "Go."

The trolley went down the stair at the speed of a walking man.

She took the stair as she had said she would. She walked it backward ahead of the leaf, one tread at a time, calling it, with her eyes on the wheels. "Landing. Steady. Lower flight. Three, four. The nosing's on the left, keep her on the lip. Five." The leaf came after her on its two bright rails, a grey slab of steel lying on its back on a cradle, four hundred and ten kilos with a chain on it, and four people on the ropes with their weight on their heels. The props creaked. It was a sound she had known since she was nineteen, the long indrawn whine of timber taking up a load, and she did not stop calling for it. "Seven. Eight. Wout, tap."

He reached out with the mallet as the cradle passed and struck the nearest prop once. *Thud*, said the spruce, a little tired. "Holds," said Wout. "Nineteen per cent. It's fine."

"Nine. Ten. The wheel's on the lip."

It was. The near wheel of the cradle rolled up against the small bright upstand welded on the rail and stopped there, as if it had been told to, and rested, and the heavy thing steadied. On the second flight, on the steep part, she heard from one of the rope hands a quick short breath, almost a laugh. It was a lip of steel, an inch high, put on a rail because a man in a room with a fan had remembered a stair.

At the foot she said, "Stair clear for the leaf," and the radio said, *Stair clear*, and she stood aside.

The gallery lay open before her, forty metres of vaulted brick under the floods, and she saw it with people in it. They looked small. Four divers in their drysuits stood in a group at the far end by the bulkhead, in the white glare, in front of the gap, and a hose ran into the dark. Sietske stood with a clipboard against her chest and her hair in its grey plait. The plank track ran away along the floor in a pale line, and the trolley went along it with a long low rumble, past the five empty hooks and the little chalk cross, until it halted twenty metres short of the wall. Sietske raised her hand. The hands let go.

"Leaf five on the track," said Lammers, on the loop. "Sill next. Marijke, go."

• • •

It was a small noise, the dredge, a wet chuckle like an enormous child drinking through a straw.

She stood at the stair foot and could see only part of it. She saw Marijke, the second diver, a short woman with a square jaw, kneeling at the mouth of the passage with a hose in both hands, and a pale rope of mud and water going away along the floor into a drain. She saw Sietske's clipboard. She saw Lammers, a little behind, with his arms folded across his drawing board and the air of a man who has been told he may not touch anything. She heard the clock on the loop. *Slack plus eleven*, said the voice. *Window available fifty-three minutes.*

She had her radio on the stair channel and her eyes on the stair. She counted the people who went up it and came down. She did the

sums as she had done them on Tuesday. She watched the props. At twenty past a boy came down for a coil of rope and went up again, and the lower flight spoke, a little, under his boots, and settled.

At twenty-nine minutes past seven, the chuckle of the dredge stopped.

She knew at once. It was a silence of a particular quality, the silence that comes when a person who has been doing a thing for a long time sees something and stops. Marijke had lifted the hose. She was kneeling still at the mouth of the passage with the nozzle across her knees, looking down at something in front of her, and Sietske had gone to her shoulder.

"Sill's not where the tape says," said Sietske's voice, on the loop. It was quiet. "Hold on. Marijke."

"It's—" The young woman's voice came over the radio low and clear, a long way off. "It's lower. In the middle. It's a— there's a cut in it. Like a trench. It's going down."

Rima was already walking. She went along the plank track in the glare with her yellow bib and her hand on her radio, past the leaf on its cradle, and stopped at Sietske's side, a little back from the mouth. She looked.

The sill had been a smooth grey skin of mud for three weeks. The dredge had taken it away in a wide band, and under it lay stone: a long worn stone lintel of old quarry granite, dark and wet, laid across the foot of the passage like a threshold. It was where the tape said it was. At the left, and the right. In the middle, for about a metre and a half, it fell away. A slot had been cut in it, long ago, clean and square, and the slot was full of silt, and Marijke had dug the silt out with her hose, a hand's breadth and then a forearm's and then a full arm's length, and still the sides went down.

"What is it?" said Rima.

"A culvert." That was Lammers. He had come up on her other side, and he said it in a quiet voice, with a kind of blank interest, as of a man reading his own epitaph. "There'll have been a pipe. Through the sill.

Old drain from the vaults. They'd have taken the pipe out when they backfilled, and left the slot. And it's filled in with mud." He took off his glasses. "De Roo measured the mud."

"How deep?"

"Marijke."

"Thirty-eight centimetres," said Marijke, on the radio. "At the middle. The edges are where the tape says. It's a trench, thirty-eight down and a bit over a metre across."

Nobody said anything. It was twenty-nine minutes past seven, and the clock on the loop was running.

"I can't seat it," said Lammers.

He said it without drama. He put his glasses on his forehead, and looked at the thing on the cradle behind them, twenty metres off. "It's a flat plate, with a flat foot. It'll sit on the stone at the sides, and there'll be a hole under the middle you could put a child through. It won't seal. I could seat it and it would leak, and a leak at that head would take the whole thing out by lunch." He was looking at the trench. "I don't— I'd like a minute."

"There isn't one," said Sietske.

"No," said Lammers. "No, I know."

Rima's radio spoke in her ear. It was Joost, from the dispatch room. "Q6, I've got the divers' report. I'm putting it to the planning layer. It's asking for the datum."

"The what?" said Sietske.

"The reference. It wants to know what the thirty-eight is measured from. It's got the sill level in your tape's terms. It says it can't use it until it knows what zero is."

"Zero's the tape."

"Which tape?"

"Mine. It's—" Sietske looked at her clipboard. "Zero's a mark on the wall. I took it off the lamp bracket. It was the first fixed thing I could find on Sunday, so I put a pencil mark at the bracket and zeroed to that."

"Then it's the lamp bracket," said Rima.

They all looked at her.

She was holding the clipboard now. It was Sietske's sheet, covered in her square neat sums, and she read it from the top, with her finger under the figures, and the thing she was looking for was in the second line, plain, and the reason she knew it was that she had priced the shoring for it on Tuesday.

"The bracket was on the wall at two metres thirty-seven above harbour datum," she said. "It's on Lammers' drawing fourteen. The bracket's been taken down but the bolt-holes are there. The tide table, the model, the basin level, they're all in harbour datum. Your tape's zeroed at the bracket. So every level on this sheet is two thirty-seven out from what the planning layer thinks it is." She turned the sheet. "If you gave it the thirty-eight as it stands, it'd put the trench at the wrong level by all of the offset. It'd set the hold wrong by about twenty centimetres."

"Which way?"

"Too high. It'd think there was water over the sill that isn't." She breathed. "It'd hold the basin at the wrong level and call it right."

There was a pause on the loop.

"Say the offset again," said Joost.

"Two metres thirty-seven. Add to your tape to get harbour datum."

She heard the keys. She stood in the glare at the mouth of the passage with a clipboard against her chest, and found that she was entirely, absurdly calm. She would not have called it courage. It was the steadiness of a person reading a number off a drawing.

"Layer's got it," said Joost. "It's recalculating. It's— okay. Okay." A long breath. "It's giving options."

• • •

They came up on the screen in the Q6 post, and Nessa read them out, in her slow clear voice, with her finger under the lines.

The first was to abort. It was a plain line. *Seat leaf five: not possible as designed. Next window with range under 1.2 m in daylight: 29 days.* She read it and stopped. "That's the seventy-third day," she said. "That's—" Nobody did.

The second took longer. It said that a filler could be made. It was a sort of tongue, a long steel foot, thirty-eight centimetres deep and a metre and a half wide, which could be bolted to the underside of leaf five before the leaf went down, so that the plate would stand in the trench like a man with one boot in a ditch. It would have to be fitted in the dry, at the foot of the stair, by hand. It said the time for that was fourteen minutes, with four people. It said the strip existed: the fabricator had left an offcut, a strip of forty-millimetre plate, a metre and a half long, at the head of the stair, as a spare, on Lammers' instruction. It said it weighed a hundred and eighty kilos.

"Have we got it?" said Nessa.

"I've got it," said Lammers. He had gone white. "It's at the stair head on the second trolley. I had it put there on Thursday. It's— I had it cut for the stone." He laughed once, a short astonished bark. "I never thought it would be a foot."

He did not look at her. Rima looked at the floor.

There was a third line. It said that the time needed for the second option, the transport down the stair, the fitting, the movement along the track and the seating, came to forty-two minutes from now. It said the window remaining was thirty-eight. It said that the shortfall could be met by extending the hold on the basin, by throttling the tide gate to keep the level where it was for a further twelve minutes. It said the channel would stay closed until half past eight. It said the eight o'clock ferry from the high town would lose its passage. It said the cost would be attributed to the harbour fund.

"It doesn't say we should," said Nessa. She had read it to the end. "It says what it costs. It says what we've got to do and where it comes out." She turned in her chair. "Tessel."

"Here."

"Can the water give me twelve minutes?"

There was a pause on the loop, and a murmur, and Bert's slow rumble saying something Rima could not catch. Then Tessel's voice, thin and certain. "It can. I'd throttle the gate to a third, and hold the basin at the level. It'll cost the channel. It's a bigger hold than the first. I'd say it's right."

"Mr Kamphuis?"

"It's right," said Bert. "I don't like it. It's right."

"Then I've got one more." Nessa put her hand on the console. "I can't see the gallery. I've got the divers' word and the camera, and I want to hear it from the woman who's there. Sietske. Can your people do it in the time?"

Sietske had not moved from the mouth of the passage. She looked at the leaf on its cradle, and at the trench, and at the four people behind her in their drysuits, and she did a sum in her head that Rima could see in the set of her jaw.

"Fourteen minutes for the tongue," she said. "If I've got four hands on the flange and the plate's here by seven thirty-eight. It's a bolt job. Twelve bolts, three each. I'd want a torque order from Lammers."

"You'll have it."

"And I'd want the stair. I want the second trolley to come down without a stop, because every stop's a minute. I'm not asking for anything. I'm telling you what the time is." She looked at Rima. It was a look that did not ask for anything either. "Stair marshal."

"It'll come."

"A hundred and eighty kilos and three hands on the rope. It'll be the lightest thing on the stair today." She heard how it sounded and did not stop. "I've got the props tapped. The spare's in. I'll walk it."

"Good."

It was twenty-four minutes before eight, by the clock on the wall of the post. In the prefab at the lane's edge, Nessa Visser took her hand off the console and laid it, palm up, on the black chair's arm. She said, to the room, to the loop, to the whole awake harbour: "Q6 releases.

Gallery occupied by six. Extended hold agreed. Revised sequence S-1b."

"Water releases," said Tessel Roos.

Both releases received, said the voice, from a small bud in a hundred ears. *Sequence S-1b begins. Hold extended twelve minutes. Eight o'clock ferry will lose its window.*

• • •

She took the second trolley down at twenty-three minutes to eight.

It was the same stair. She walked it backward ahead of the cradle, one tread at a time, and it did not feel the same at all. It was lighter. There was nothing on the cradle but a long grey strip of steel lying on its side with a chain over it, and on the ropes were three people, not four, who were going fast. She called it low. "Landing. Lower flight. Left, left. The lip." The wheel found the upstand, and sat, and went on. "Nine. Ten. Wout, tap." He tapped. The props gave their dull notes, and she did not hear one of them.

It was a short journey. It took four minutes. She was aware at the end of it of the strangest thing: that she had spent six weeks being useless, and had been, for four minutes and twenty-eight steps, entirely used.

"Stair clear for the tongue," she said at the foot.

The four divers took it from the cradle without a word. They moved like a machine. Marijke and a tall quiet man called Karel, who had not yet said a thing all morning, got hold of the strip at the ends, and Sietske, on one knee, laid her hands on the underside of leaf five, and Lammers stood over them reading out numbers in a high thin voice that had no panic in it at all. "Bolt one, thirty. Two, thirty. Not that way, across. Diagonal. Three." They were working fast. She could hear the rattle of the spanners, a quick dry clatter. Somebody dropped a nut. Somebody said a short unprintable word. Nobody looked up.

She stood at the foot of the stair and watched the minutes go on the loop. *Slack plus forty-six. Window available thirty minutes.* It said it in the same voice. It did not say *hurry*. It did not say anything else.

At five minutes to eight Sietske said, "Tongue's on."

"Torque," said Lammers.

"Torqued. Twelve bolts. All thirty."

"Then walk her."

They walked her. Four divers, four hundred and ten kilos plus a hundred and eighty, on a cradle, along a plank track in the white glare, past five hooks and a chalk cross, with Wout on the brake. It took a minute and ten seconds. She heard the wheels on the plank, a long low rumble like a train in a cutting. She heard Lammers say, "Stop." The cradle stopped. The slab stood with its great new foot a hair above the dark slot, its steel tongue pointing down, and Sietske put up a hand.

"Down," said Lammers.

It went down slowly. They lowered it by two chains, a hand on each, and as it came the water in the passage behind rose up under the foot of it in a shining black skin and fell away again. She could not see the seat. She could only see the divers' backs. She heard the tongue go into the trench with a deep iron note, a short clean knock, like a key in a lock. She heard it seat. She heard, after, a long soft hiss as the rubber took up.

"It's on," said Lammers. He said it in an odd voice. "It's on. Sietske?"

"It's on."

"Seal?"

"Dry on the left. Dry on the right." A pause. "Dry in the middle. Dry." She seemed to have run out of words. "It's dry, Oscar."

He took off his glasses. He stood there in the floodlight with them in his hand, looking at the wall of grey steel, and the rubber, and the small clean line at the foot where the tongue went in. Then he said, without any emphasis at all, "Torque the anchors," and turned his back on them for a moment and blew his nose.

It was four minutes past eight. The clock on the loop said, *Leaf five seated. Window closes at 08:19.* In the lane above, the eight o'clock ferry from the high town, which had been sitting at the Westgate bend with its engines idling, gave two short blasts for its lost passage, patient and aggrieved.

• • •

The back half took forty minutes to pump.

She stayed at the stair foot. It was the place she had been given, and she kept it. She stood against the cold brick with her radio in one hand, watching the pumps go on and the hoses stiffen, listening to the long sound of water going out of the back of the gallery in a regular wet rush, like someone clearing his throat. The light was strong and white. The pumps shuddered. Out of the dark beyond the bulkhead, over forty minutes, came a long procession of small unwelcome sounds: the knock of a loose brick, the drip of a ceiling, a slow metallic tick as the leaves took up their load. Lammers stood at the wall with his hand on the steel as a man stands with his hand on a horse. The roof held. It held with a patience that was almost insulting. At half past eight he said to nobody in particular, "I had a very good feeling about that roof," and nobody laughed, and Rima heard Wout, beside her, let out a short unsteady breath that was nearly one.

At nine minutes to nine the level in the back half had dropped to the knee. At nine, to the ankle. A little after, Sietske's voice said on the loop, "It's safe. We're going in."

They went in at ten past. Rima did not go. It was not hers. She stood at the foot of the stair with her hands at her sides while four people in drysuits and two in white overalls, who had come down from the registry's van without a sound, went through a door in a wall of steel into a space that she would never see, and the heavy plate closed behind them like a lid.

It was a long time.

She did not know how long. She heard, now and then, through the iron, a murmur, a low voice, a long scrape, a pause. She heard Sietske say something in the tone she had used on the first day, kind. She heard Karel say, "Mind her head." Once she heard someone, a woman, say clearly, "All right. Slowly. Slowly." She stood at the foot of the stair with her back against the brick and did not move. At the head of it, twenty-eight steps above her, she could hear nothing at all, and she knew that a woman in a navy coat was sitting on a wooden chair with her hands on her knees and a flask between her feet.

At twenty to ten the door opened.

They came out slowly, in a line. Two stretchers, each grey, each under a blanket, each carried by six. They had been fastened with the care of people who did it well. Sietske came first. She did not look at Rima. She came past her at the foot of the stair, and stopped, and said, in a low voice, as a person might say the next word of a prayer:

"Stair."

Rima turned her head. She looked up the twenty-eight steps, the two flights, the props, the rails, the lamps, the green awning at the head against a pale blue sky. She was aware of her own voice, clear, as she said into the radio, "Stair clear for the carry," and of another voice, a long way above, a small one, saying, "Stair clear."

She stood aside.

22

The return

She had asked him once. It had been at ten past five, in the dark, on the bench in the dive tent, and she had rung the crew line before she could think of a reason not to.

Ineke had answered, and been courteous, and put her through. He had been awake. She had known that from the first word. He had said, "Rima," in the voice he used for a thing he had been expecting, and she had said she would only be a minute, and had asked it as plainly as she could.

"Do you want anything while it's happening? A voice. A word. The sound of it, on the loop. Gerrit and Esther have it. I'd put you on if you wanted. I can ring you from the stair."

"No," said Dani.

"Not even—"

"I said no, Rima. Not the loop, and not the picture either. I don't want the stair in the room." He said it as a man declines a second cup of tea. "I've thought about it. I've thought about it a good deal. I'd like to be told when it's done. After. Not before. I'd like to be told it's done by somebody who's not been standing in it." A pause, with a fan in it. "That's not you, is it. You'll have been standing in it."

"Yes."

"Then ring me after you've sat down."

"All right."

"Thank you for asking." He said it lightly. "You did it well. I'd have said no to anyone. Go and stack things."

She had gone and stacked things. She had not asked again.

Now she stood at the head of the stair under the green awning, and watched the first stretcher come up.

They came as they had been told to. They came by the numbers. She had walked them through it on Thursday with Wout and Sietske, and then again on Friday with the carrying party in the lane, six men and women in drysuits with towels round their necks, and she had written the count on a card that Wout now held, and she did not need it. She heard it. *One*, said the bearer at the foot, low, at the first tread. *Two.* The stretcher came up, level, on its six pairs of hands, four at the poles and two on the rope, with a grey blanket pulled up straight to the ends, and the props took the weight with a long low note, and held. *Three. Four.* The six faces were set. They looked straight ahead, at nothing, at the wall, at the next tread, as people look when they have been told that to be looked at is a kind of weight.

Her own voice said, in the radio, "Landing. Left. Lower flight clear. Slowly."

"Slowly," said Sietske.

It took six minutes. She had known it would. It was a steep stair. She watched the bearers' boots on the treads, a scuff and a pause, a scuff and a pause, and each time they stopped the line of the stretcher dipped a hand's breadth and came up again. At the landing they rested. Nobody spoke. A breath of wind came down from the open awning and moved the corner of the blanket, and Sietske, at the rope, put out a hand without looking.

Ioana Stoica had stood up.

She had done it as the first bearer's head came into view at the turn of the stair, without a word, slowly, and now she stood by the little wooden chair in her navy coat with her scarf wound round her neck and her hands at her sides. Her face was white. It was composed. Beside her Pim Haring had put his cap against his chest in both hands, and was looking at the top of the stair with the stunned humble attention of a man at a launch.

The stretcher came to the head of the flight, and the bearers stopped, as they had been told.

"Slowly," said Ioana.

They set it down. They did it with great care, on the plank walkway, under the awning, in the cold clear light, and stood back, six of them, with their hands open at their sides. Ioana stepped forward. She laid her palm on the blanket, at about where a shoulder would be, and left it there.

"It's morning," she said.

She said it quietly, as one says it to a person in a bed. She stood a moment longer. Then she said, in the same voice, "I've got Kees at twelve. I haven't forgotten. He'll hate it. I'll tell Mrs Dolk it was a good vet." A small sound escaped her, a short dry breath that might in another place have been laughter. "She's to have the cat done every second Saturday. She's had it done since she broke her hip. Who's going to—" She stopped. She did not go on.

Pim Haring said, in a low rough voice, to the top of his own cap, "She said the Q4 junction box was on the wrong breaker."

Ioana turned her head.

"Last winter. I said it'd always been on that one. I said it was fine. She said it wasn't fine, it was on the lamp circuit, you'd get a feed back to the sockets, and I said Adina, I've been doing this since you were in school." He swallowed. "I went and looked on the Monday. She was right. I never told her. I meant to." He looked down. "I thought you should have it. It's a thing she did."

"Thank you," said Ioana.

"It's only—"

"It's a good thing to have." She said it with great gentleness. She took her hand from the blanket. "Take her now. To the van, with Mr Haring and me."

"Of course," said Sietske.

They took her up. They went along the lane at a walking pace, six bearers, a woman in a navy coat, a man with his cap in his hand. Rima

watched them go. The sun was full on the quay. It lit the wet stone to a long bright ribbon, and their shadows went out before them across it, long and thin. At the Spur gate the white van stood with its back doors open. Beyond it, at the gate, a small knot of people had gathered, and a young woman in a grey apron, with her arms folded, stood a little apart from them with her feet planted.

The second stretcher was on the stair.

Rima did not look at it. She looked at the rail. She looked at her own hand upon it, at the knuckles, at the faint grey ghost of a chalk mark that had got on her cuff. She could hear the count. *One. Two.* It came up out of the stair in the same low voice, and the props took it, a long soft note, and she heard it as she might have heard a tide.

It came to the landing. It rested. It came to the head.

She stood aside, as she had said she would, with her back to the awning post, and the bearers carried it past her within an arm's length. She heard the creak of the poles. She heard Sietske's voice, low, saying, "Easy," and the soft scuff of boots on the planks. She smelled, for a moment, cold stone and river water and the salt of the dive team's suits. She kept her eyes on the green of the awning and said nothing at all, because she had been asked to say nothing.

It went by. It went along the lane at the same slow pace, in the same bright light. She did not watch it go.

• • •

They had a van each. Ioana had wanted that. The first, a white one with the funeral firm's name on the side in small grey letters, took her sister to a place on the east side of the town where a man in a dark suit would be waiting with a pot of tea he did not expect anyone to drink. The second was the registry's own, a grey one with no name, and it waited at the Spur gate with its doors open and a young man in white overalls standing straight at the back.

Rima came along the lane after the others, a long way behind, with her bib in her hand, in no hurry. She saw the grey van from fifty metres. She saw the young woman in the apron come forward.

Femke had been at the gate since a quarter to seven. She had told nobody she was coming. She had walked from the canteen at half past six with a flask of coffee under her arm and had stood by the barrier for three hours without a hat, with her hair tied back in a cloth, watching the lane, and she had said to the gate staff, who had offered her a chair, that she would stand. She stood now. She came up to the open doors of the grey van and stopped a yard from them, and the young man in white looked at her once and looked away, with such tact that Rima, at fifty metres, felt it as a small clear note.

Femke put out one hand. She held it out in the air in front of the open doors, palm down, a little above the level of the stretcher, and kept it there for perhaps a count of five. Then she took it back and put it in the pocket of her apron.

"Thank you," she said, to the young man. "I'll see him tomorrow. At the annex, at ten. On my own."

"Yes, Ms Brandt."

"He's asked me not to look at the— at the rest of it. I'll go in and sit. I'll sit by him. That's all."

"It's all arranged."

"Thank you."

She stood back. The doors closed. They closed with a soft, definite, expensive click, and the van drew away from the gate into the sun, and she stood watching it down the causeway road till it was a grey square and then a point.

When Rima came up, she did not turn round. She said, to the empty road, in a low voice, "I'm going to go back and do the lunches."

"Yes."

"There's a hundred and ten. I'd said eighty. The registry rang. They're all coming over." She wiped her nose with the back of her wrist. "It's a good thing. It'll keep me. I'll ring him at six."

"He said he'd be on."

"I heard what he said." She turned. Her face was wet, and calm. "Don't say anything."

"No."

"Good." She looked at the yellow bib in Rima's hand. "You can bring the trays down at one. If you like. If you want something to do."

"I'd like that," said Rima.

"Don't be nice about it."

"No."

She went back down the causeway, fast, with her arms swinging and her cloth tied tight over her hair, towards the canteen with its tin roof and its smoke.

• • •

Ioana Stoica came back up the lane from the van alone, in her navy coat, and stood a moment by the awning with her hands in her pockets, looking down the stair. "I will be early for Kees, for once," she said. Then she went down the lane in the full sun, a woman in a long coat, with a scarf, small against the long bright stone, and Pim Haring, who had been standing silent by the awning, put his cap on his head, said to nobody in particular that he would walk her, and went after her.

• • •

Then it was quiet.

The lane emptied slowly, as a room does after a meeting. The divers went off in a line towards the tent with their suits half down and their helmets under their arms, and somebody was laughing, a high short unsteady laugh, and somebody else was telling them not to. Lammers went by with his drawing board, alone, with his glasses on his forehead, and stopped by the head of the stair, and put out his hand and laid it for a moment on the nearest prop, and went on. The paramedics had gone. The pump man had come out from under his trailer and

was sitting on the tailgate with his boots off. The old man in the wheelchair had been wheeled away long ago, towards the sun, with his daughter holding the blanket to his chin.

She stood at the head of the stair.

It was all she had. She had been given it a month ago in a shed, and she had held it, and it was done. The awning stirred. The chair stood where it had stood, with its blanket folded on the seat and its flask gone. Under the awning, on the plank walkway, was a small dark patch of damp where something had been set down, and as she watched it began, slowly, to dry.

She looked for something to do. She looked, with the quick automatic glance of a woman who had spent twenty years finding it, for a rail that needed testing, a prop to tap, a lamp that had gone out, a number to take down. There was nothing. The props were sound. The lamps were lit. The log was written. She stood at the head of a stair in a yellow bib that said STAIR, and she had nothing left to count.

Her hands, she saw, had begun to shake.

It was a fine fast tremor, in both hands, and she looked at it coldly, as she had looked at the one in the training room, as at a gauge. It did not stop. She put them in her pockets. It did not stop. She took them out again, and looked round, and there was nothing to put them to.

"Do you want tea?" said Wout.

He had come up the stair behind her. He stood on the plank with a paper cup in each hand, a long pale boy in a hard hat, with his pencil behind his ear, and the inside of his left forearm covered in small clear capitals. He held one cup out. She looked at it.

"No," she said.

"I'll put it here." He set it on the rail. "It's only tea."

He did not go away. He stood a moment longer, and looked down the stair with an expression of great attention, and then put out the mallet, which was hanging from his belt, and tapped the nearest prop. It gave back a short flat note. It had gone, in nine days, from nineteen per cent to something a little drier. She heard him hear it.

"It's dried," he said. "It's a bit lighter." He cleared his throat. "Is there anything you want me to—"

"No. Thank you."

"I'll be at the trolley."

"Wout."

"Yes?"

She did not know what she had been going to say. "It held," she said.

"It held," said Wout, as if she had told him something he had not expected to be told, and went down the stair with the mallet swinging.

She sat. She did it slowly, on the top step, at the edge of the plank, under the awning, with her knees up and her back against the post, and she looked down the stair. It was a long way. It went down, in its two flights, in its fourteen props, in the lamplight, into a clean pale blue haze, and at the foot of it was a floor of old flagstones. She did not look at the floor.

She took out her phone. It was eleven minutes past eleven. She looked at the number for some time, and pressed it, and held the phone to her ear.

It rang four times. It was Ineke, who said, "Ms Sayegh," in her pleasant careful voice, and "One moment," and the line clicked.

"Is it done?" said Dani.

"Yes."

There was nothing. She heard the fan. It turned, a long way off, in a room she had never seen, with a small even whirr, and she held the phone against her cheek and did not say anything else.

"Thank you," said Dani.

"Was there— I mean, is there anything—"

"Was Ioana at the head?"

"Yes."

"Good." A breath. "And Femke?"

"At the gate. She's coming at six. She said you'd be on."

"I'll be on." There was a pause. When he spoke again it was in an odd careful voice, like someone setting down something he could not put a name to. "I'd like to say something. I can't think what. I've been sitting here since five trying to think what you say. I've got a lot of words." He gave a short unsteady laugh. "It turns out none of them's the one."

"You don't have to."

"No. I know." The fan whirred. "I've got Gerrit at half past. He's been on since seven. I think he'd like a bit of company, I think he's not been— he's got a lot to say. I said I'd be on." A pause. "I'd better go. I'm glad you rang. I'm glad you waited. I'll be on at six."

"All right."

"Rima."

"Yes?"

"Eat something."

He rang off. She sat with the phone against her cheek, and then in her lap, with the screen going slowly dark.

At half past eleven, a long way off, at the far end of the Spur, a chain began to run. She heard it before she heard the crane: Q2, the first lift of flour for the Kade, held back until the lane was empty. It was a slow iron rattle, as of a great weight being taken up, and under it a slow creak, and she knew it, and knew what it was, and did not turn her head. It went on for some time. It stopped. In the silence after it, she heard, clearly and a little thin across the water, the sound of a crane's long arm swinging round on its bearing, and a man's voice, near, shouting something about the hook, and somebody laughing.

She sat on the step and looked down the stair. At some point she saw that Wout had left something under the cup on the rail, a cheese roll in a paper napkin, without a word. She remembered what she had been told, and ate it, cold, to the last of the caraway.

23

Nothing

The fourth Tuesday began at ten to six with frost. It lay on the lane in a fine grey bloom, and on the roof of the prefab, and on the lens of the camera that watched the old gallery stair, so that the picture on Nessa's second screen looked as if it had been breathed on. The stair had been shut since December. A steel hoarding stood across its head, painted yellow, with a tarpaulin lashed over the top rail to keep the rain out of the shoring. The permanent masonry was due in April. Until then nobody was supposed to be anywhere near it.

Anja had asked her to spend Tuesdays at the Spur through February, in the Q6 post, in the corner by the filing cabinet, so that the monthly report would have a person in it who could say what a stop felt like from the inside. Rima had said that she was in no position to say what anything felt like. Anja had said that was exactly why she was asking. It had been put in writing by someone in personnel with a stamp: *Site reader (observer), no authority.* She had a folding stool, a flask, and a place on the loop she was not allowed to speak on.

The sequence was an ordinary one. Rima had read it the evening before, as she read all of them now, for the pleasure of seeing it be dull. *S-31: morning wash of the Q2–Q6 apron, and pressure test of the Q5 fuel line.* Water down the lane at ten past six, a hose crew from the authority, a man with a gauge. It was done every morning of the week. The cold store at Q3 depended on it, because the health inspectors would not let a reefer lorry back onto a wet apron, and at half past six

that morning a lorry was due in with forty pallets of chilled salmon for the high-town hospitals.

Nessa sat in the black chair with her coffee going cold beside the green book. She had been in it for ten weeks. It no longer looked like a thing she was being polite to.

"Q6 place," she said, at five past six, to the loop. "Lane clear. Gallery stair closed and hoarded, nobody in it, no one's been in it since Friday." She looked at the second screen. The picture was a pale smear. "Camera's iced. I can see the hoarding. I can't see behind it."

Gallery clear of persons? said the dry voice on the console. *Yes. No. Cannot see.*

"It's shut," said Nessa, to herself.

She pressed *Yes.*

She did it without thinking. Rima, on the stool, watched her do it. The finger went easily, and Nessa's face did not change at all.

Q6 releases, said the voice. A pause. *Water releases.* Then the long low sound of the lane beginning to take the wash, a hiss from the far end like a tap left running in another room.

It was at twelve minutes past that she saw it.

The screen was still the colour of milk. But at the left of the hoarding, where the tarpaulin hung over the rail, there was a darker patch, and the patch moved. It slid sideways. It stopped. It slid back, about the height of a man's shoulder, quite slowly, as a thing moves that has been waiting for the right moment and is not in a hurry.

Nessa put down her cup.

"Rima."

"I can't speak on the loop," said Rima. "I'm not allowed."

"I know. I'm not asking you to. Look at it. Tell me what you see. Not what it is. What you see."

"A dark thing. Left of the hoarding. It moved."

"It moved."

"Twice."

"Twice." Nessa's hand went to the console and rested on a flat red key under a hinged guard. The wash was a third of the way down the lane. She could hear it. "It's a tarp," she said. "It's the tarp. It's a tarp in a wind, and it's frost, and I've a camera I can't see through, and I'm a tired old woman who wants her breakfast."

"Yes."

"Don't say yes."

"Then I won't say anything."

"No. Say something." Her voice was very low. "Say it isn't anybody."

"I can't."

"No," said Nessa. "That's what I thought."

She lifted the guard.

The key was cold, and gave a little under her thumb, and there was a chime. *Stopped*, said the dry voice, in the post and the gatehouse and in the small plastic buds of nine people along the Spur. *Sequence S-31 held at step four. Apron wash halted. Cost: Q3 reefer unloading, 06:30, will miss its window. Stop recorded:* N. Visser, *06:12. Delay cost attributed to the harbour fund.* And then, on the quay itself, from the loudspeaker on the post's roof, so that Rima felt it in the soles of her feet, the sound of the hoses closing down one after another, a long descending sigh.

• • •

It took Gijs eleven minutes to get to the hoarding. He had come over from Q5 with a torch and a hard hat, a stocky red-faced young man who had once, long ago on a night that none of them ever mentioned, stood behind Nessa's chair and heard her say *stop the fill* twice. He went down the lane at a trot in the grey light. They watched him on the screen, a small bright figure in the white smear, stopping at the hoarding, putting up a hand, lifting the corner of the tarpaulin.

A gull went up.

It went up with a great clatter of wings and an offended cry, and wheeled once over the lane and settled on the roof of the Q5 post. It

had been sitting on the top rail, under the tarpaulin, out of the frost. The tarp had been moving because the bird was walking on it. There was nobody behind the hoarding. There was nobody on the stair. There was a tangle of frozen rope, a pallet of timber, and a large white feather.

"It's a gull," said Gijs, on the loop. His voice cracked on it. "It's a— Nessa, it's a gull. It's been in there all night, there's about forty of its— there's a lot of mess."

"Thank you, Gijs," said Nessa.

"I'm sorry. I thought—"

"I know what you thought. Come back in."

She pressed the key marked *Release.* She said, "Q6 releases," and Tessel Roos's voice, from the gatehouse, said, "Water releases," and the wash began again at the point where it had stopped. It was nineteen minutes to seven. The lorry had been due in at half past six.

Nessa sat with her hands on the console and did not say anything for some time.

"Don't," she said at last.

"I wasn't going to."

"You were going to say it was right."

"I was going to say nothing."

"Good. It was a gull." She turned the cup a quarter-turn on its saucer. "Don't you tell me it was right. It would've been right if it had been a man. It wasn't. It was a gull. I stopped forty pallets of fish for a gull."

• • •

Aart Smid arrived at twenty past seven.

He came across the lane at a pace that was almost a run, a big heavy man of fifty-five in a white coat and a woollen hat, with his hands out in front of him and his face the colour of the inside of a ham. He was the manager of the cold store at Q3. He had been in the building since four. He had stood on his own apron at half past six in

the cold with a clipboard and watched a lorry sit with its engine running while a man in the Q6 post decided whether a bird was a person.

Rima, on her stool, kept still.

"I want to say," said Aart Smid, in the doorway, "that I'm not here to say it was wrong. I've said that to everybody. I said it to the driver. I said, it's the rules, it's the new rules, it's what we signed. I said, it's a woman who lost— I know what she lost. I know. Everybody knows. I stood at the thing in November with a candle." He took off his hat. "It was a gull."

"Yes," said Nessa. "I'm sorry."

"It was a *gull.* It's— there are four hundred of them. They're on every roof. They're on my roof. I've got a man whose whole job is getting them off. If you stopped the harbour for every gull you'd have— I'm not saying that. I'm not saying you shouldn't. I want that clear. I'm saying that the lorry's temperature log, I've got it here, it came off the reefer at ten past seven, it says four point three, it says four point three for forty minutes, the hospital's limit is three, it's *three*, and they sent it back. They've sent it back. Eleven pallets. The rest they'll take at a discount, I've rung them, they're being very decent about it. I'm very angry."

"You're entitled."

"No, I'm not." He rubbed his face with the hat. "I'm not angry. That's the— it's a woman who— I'm angry. I'm very angry. I've been up since four. I'm not angry with *you.* I'm angry with the bird."

"It's all right," said Nessa.

"It isn't all right! That's my point! It isn't, it's twenty-eight thousand four hundred's worth of salmon in a skip!" He heard it. He stopped, and looked at Rima, who had not moved, and at the black chair, and at the small stooped woman in it with the green book at her elbow. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I put a figure on it."

Nobody said anything.

"I'm sorry for your fish," said Nessa.

It went into him like a nail. He stared at her.

"You're sorry for my *fish*."

"And for the hospital. And the driver. I'm not sorry I pressed it." She said it quite gently. "I'd have pressed it again. I'm sorry it was a gull."

"That's rich," said Aart Smid, in a voice that cracked on the word. "That's— I'll tell you what that is." He stood in the doorway with his hat in both hands, breathing through his mouth, with the frost still on the shoulders of his coat, and Rima, who had been told she had no authority, thought that he looked like a man who had been made to carry a heavy thing a long way for nothing and had just now been told that he would be paid for the carrying.

He put his hat on.

"I'll be speaking to Ms Rohe," he said.

• • •

Anja came at ten.

She came in her navy jacket with her clipboard, alone, and she did not go to Nessa first. She went to the cold store. Rima saw her cross the lane, a small upright figure, and go in at the big steel door of Q3, and she was in there for forty minutes. When she came out her face was perfectly composed, and her left hand was shaking.

"Has he gone?" said Nessa, when she reached the post.

"Not yet."

"What did you say?"

"I said the stop fund pays two and a half thousand, which it will, and that the rest goes through me, which it will. I said I'd sign for twenty-eight four on Monday." She set the clipboard on the filing cabinet. "I said your stop was recorded in good faith, and that the protection stands, and that nobody in this building is going to say a word to you about a gull."

"And him?"

"He said he'd been going to say something else, and then he thought better of it, and then he thought again." The faint dry movement at the corner of her mouth was not a smile. "He asked me how

long the thing had to last. I said six months, and then we review it. He said, 'And if it's always a gull?' I said that it won't be always a gull. He said, 'How do you know?' And I said I don't."

"That's honest."

"It's what I've got." She took off her glasses and held them. "Floris Pot rang at nine. He says we ought to look at what he calls the good-faith test. A reasonable observer. A threshold. He says there's a case for a little training, for Ms Visser, so that she's better calibrated." She put the glasses on again. "I said no."

"You could," said Nessa.

"I could. And in two months nobody at Q3 or Q5 would press a thing they couldn't put their hand on, and you'd be right to want that. I'm not sending you on a course because of a bird on a hoarding." She picked up the clipboard. "It's the price of the thing."

She heard it as it went out of her. Rima saw her hear it. For a moment something crossed her face that had nothing to do with composure, a quick bright flinch, like a woman who has put her hand on a stove.

"That's not a thing to say to a man who's lost eleven pallets," she said.

"You said it to me."

"I said it to you," said Anja. "I'd like to have said something else." She stood in the doorway of the Q6 post with the clipboard against her chest and her mouth a little open, and then she shut it. "He's moving a third of his contract to Westgate. He told me. It's a private quay, no stop. It's cheaper, and it's quicker, and it'll cost the harbour about a quarter of a million a year. He wasn't doing it to hurt anyone. He said so three times."

Nobody spoke.

"I've got it in my diary," said Anja. "For the monthly. I'll put it in as it is." She went out.

• • •

The lorry that had come in with the salmon went out again at eleven with eleven fewer pallets than it had brought, and Rima watched it go. She had come out of the post for air. It went up the causeway in the thin light with its cab lamps on, a long white box on wheels with a refrigeration unit humming on its nose, and a man in the passenger seat with his arm along the window. He did not look at the post.

She went back in.

Nessa had the green book open on the console, and the ruler laid under a line. It was not the book she had written in on the night; that had gone to Teun, and come back, and lay in a drawer. This was a new one. It had a brown cover with a picture of a lighthouse. She had said nothing about that, and Rima had said nothing about it either.

She was writing. She wrote slowly, with her tongue between her teeth, a thing Rima had never seen her do, and the pencil made a small dry sound on the page. When she had finished she put the pencil down, and turned the book round so that it faced the stool.

Tues. 25 Feb. 06:12. Q6 stair. Tarp. Gull. Stopped S-31. Delay 19 min. A. Smid (Q3), salmon, 11 pallets, 28,400. Gijs went. Anja paid. And under it, in a smaller hand, in the narrow column she kept for the things that went on no roster: *I would do it again.*

"It isn't a column," said Rima. "It's not in the headings."

"I ruled it myself." Nessa closed the book. "The screen said the lorry would miss its window. It never said fish. It knew the apron, it didn't know the fish. And I want it written down somewhere that I know what it cost." She reached for her cup, and found it cold, and drank it anyway. "I nearly didn't press it, you know."

"Yes."

"I had my hand on the guard and I thought, it's a tarp, you old fool, you've got a lorry, and a man who's been up since four. And I thought, it isn't a tarp until somebody's looked." She put the cup down. "That's all there is. That's all I've got. I looked at a dark patch on a bit of can-

vas for as long as it takes to think it, and then I pressed the key. It wasn't brave. I want you to put that in your report."

"I can't put anything in the report. I'm an observer."

"Then observe it." She turned the first page of the new book over. "I'll be doing it again on Thursday. It'll be a rope or a man with a ladder. Somebody'll be angry. I'll say I'm sorry for the fish."

On the console, the small printer by the window hummed and put out a slip. Nessa tore it off and read it and folded it in four, as she had folded the last, and put it in her pocket. Then she picked up the pencil, and, in the column she had ruled herself, under the date, added the time.

24

What remains owed

The findings came out on the fourth of March, a Tuesday, at nine in the morning, and by ten past Rima had read the paragraph about herself four times.

She read it at her kitchen table, in her socks, on the small screen of her phone. It was page sixty-one of two hundred and fourteen, in Teun's prose, in numbered sentences, with no adjectives, and she had known it would be, and it did not help.

The reviewer of the integration package did not open Appendix C, which was available to her and which stated, in terms, that clearance of the Q6 lane should not be read as indicating that the gallery was unoccupied. She had six hours allotted and used five hours thirty-eight minutes of them on the main specification. She annotated the appendices as for information and intended to read them in a second session, which she did not book. When she found the appendix, in the course of this inquiry, she verified the portal record and disclosed the omission the same day. The inquiry finds that the omission was a cause of the harm, and not the cause. Had Appendix C been read, it is more likely than not that the occupancy rule would have been challenged before deployment. The same may be said of five other acts or omissions identified in Part Four. The reviewer did not intend harm. She did not conceal what she had done.

Then, on the next page, in a sentence by itself:

The inquiry recommends that the reviewer not hold review or certifying authority over integration of operational systems at the harbour for a period of five years.

She put the phone down, face upward, on the oilcloth, and looked at it. It was, as far as she could tell, very nearly the paragraph she would have written.

A long section took the other six in turn, and she read it as one reads a bill already paid. Near the end, in a paragraph she read three times and then put down, it said that the phrase which had appeared in the press in November was inaccurate. *Several people did several things. Each of them was in a position to have done otherwise, and each acted within the scope that had been given them. Their scopes did not meet. That is not the same as saying that no one acted.*

At the foot of the last page, a small note said what remained to be decided and by whom. *Liability, compensation beyond the interim, and the institutional consequences for the authority and for Brakel Marine Services are matters for the hearing in May and for those parties. This report makes no finding on them.*

Annelies Terhorst's correction had come through the registry's channel in February, as she had said it would: one page, in her own hand, with the four conditions renumbered and a fifth added, which the planning office had pinned above its desk and which Joost, who had read it aloud to himself twice, called the best interface contract he had ever seen.

The letter came at twenty to eleven, by courier, in a grey envelope with the authority's mark in the corner. The boy who brought it made her sign a sheet. She read it on the landing, standing, with the door open behind her, in the stairwell smell of old carpet.

Dear Ms Sayegh. Following the findings of the independent inquiry, and the Authority's acceptance of its recommendation in respect of review authority, the Authority has concluded that the post of Senior Lock Engineer (Integration), which carries review and certifying authority, cannot be held by you. The Authority has considered whether an altern-

ative post can be offered and has found none at your grade. Your employment will therefore end on the thirty-first of March. You will receive the payments set out in the enclosed schedule. You have the right to appeal within twenty-one days.

It was signed by someone in personnel she had never met, with a rubber stamp. Under it, in a different pen, in a small upright hand, someone had written a line.

I argued for the alternative. It was not available. I am sorry. A.R.

She read it twice. She did not call it unjust. She had read page sixty-one. She folded it along its creases and put it in the pocket of her coat with the other paper, the findings she had printed at the library. Eleven years. She had thought it would feel like a door shutting. It felt like a measurement.

She was not unemployed. Not until the thirty-first.

She did not go to lunch. Not yet.

She went to the lock office instead, because it was the only place she knew how to go.

It was on the ground floor of the authority's east block, two rooms and a corridor that smelled of cold tea and machine oil, and she had walked into it every working morning for eleven years. At twenty to twelve it was nearly empty. Two of them were out at the Westgate. Mirjam, who kept the rota, was at her desk with her headphones on, and she looked up when the door opened and took them off with a care that told Rima she had been told.

"Rima," she said. "Oh. I didn't think you'd come in."

"I thought I'd see about the desk."

"There's no hurry. They said the thirty-first." Mirjam said it to the stapler. "I was going to ring. I wasn't going to put it in an email. I'm so—" She stopped and started again. "Do you want tea?"

"No, thank you."

"I'll make it anyway."

She went out. Rima stood in the middle of the room. Her desk was by the window, with the lamp she had bought herself because the

authority's gave a blue light. Nobody had touched it. That was the first thing she noticed, and it was worse than if somebody had: the mug, the pencil pot, a pair of reading glasses she had been looking for since January. They lay as she had left them on a Friday afternoon, in the belief that she would be back.

On the wall above the desk was the rota board, a long white magnetic sheet ruled in weeks, with a column for each lock and a row for each name and a small round magnet for each person, coloured by trade. Hers was blue. It had stood in the row for the east leaf, week after week, since she had come. She read along the row. The magnets were there until the end of this week. From Monday there was nothing. Somebody had taken hers down, and the blue magnet next along had been slid across, neatly, to close the gap, so that the line ran on as if it had never had a space in it.

She looked at it for some time. It was not cruel. It was correct. A rota had to be filled, and she could see that, and she went on standing there with her hand against the edge of the board as if she were testing a gate.

Below the board, pinned to the cork with a red pin, was a work-order card. *East leaf, Westgate: bearing noise, lower race. Reported R. Sayegh. Assign: TBC.* The date on it was a year old. The handwriting was hers. She had written it standing at that desk on a Tuesday, meaning to get to it after the integration review, and then there had been the storm.

She did not take it down. It was not hers to take down.

Mirjam came back with two mugs and put one on the desk, on a coaster, and neither of them touched it. When Rima said she would come back for the box, Mirjam said of course, and then, quickly, as one steps off a kerb, "Everyone's sorry," and Rima said she knew, and found that it was the least useful sentence anyone had said to her all day.

Upstairs, on the third floor, the reviewers' room had a square of glass in its door at the height of her eyes. She had not meant to go up. She found that she had.

There was a young woman at the table. She was twenty-five, perhaps, in a grey cardigan, with a ring binder and a small digital clock that Rima knew, because it was the one she had used, counting down from six hours. On the wall above the screen, where in her time there had been nothing, a laminated card had been stuck up with four pieces of tape. Rima could read the heading through the glass without trying. *REVIEW PROCEDURE v3.* And the first line, in bold: *Step 1. Open every attachment. Opens are logged.*

The young woman opened Appendix A. A small chime came through the door. She opened B. Chime. C. Chime. D. She wrote something on a form and ticked a box, and sat for a moment with her pen against her lip, looking at the screen with an expression Rima knew from the inside of her own face, an intelligent, anxious, decent attention, and then she turned the page of the specification and began to read.

It worked. That was what Rima thought, standing in the corridor with her hand on the cold brass of the door plate. It was the best card the authority had ever put on a wall. It had been written out of one afternoon, and her name was nowhere on it, and the young woman at the table had never heard it and never would; she would read her six hours in a room with a clock, she would open every appendix, and something might still get past her. She would not know why. She would be sorry in the same way.

The young woman looked up, saw a person in the glass, and gave her the quick polite smile one gives a stranger in a corridor. Rima smiled back. She went down the stairs.

At ten to one she was on the tram to Wharf Lane with nothing from the desk in her bag, because she had found that there was nothing there she wanted.

• • •

The chandlery was in Wharf Lane, three doors down from the locksmith's, and Femke had opened it on the second of March at eleven in the morning to a queue of forty-one.

Rima had stood outside it for a quarter of an hour on the Saturday, in the cold, looking at the old painted sign, a long faded board in cracked gold letters that said J. HOFMAN, SHIP CHANDLER, EST. 1904, which Femke had refused on principle to take down. Below it, in new white paint on the glass, someone had written BRANDT. KITCHEN. LUNCH. She had not gone in. Now she pushed the door, and a bell rang, and she walked into a room that smelled of soup.

It was the biggest room she had ever seen Femke in, and the smallest. It was long and high, with a ceiling of tin tiles and a row of iron hooks along one wall where ropes had once hung, and at the back, behind a counter of scrubbed pine, a six-ring range under an extractor whose great square mouth hung over it like a bell. The floor sloped. She saw it at once, as she would have seen a crooked gate: a gentle fall of perhaps one in forty towards the street door, with a rubber mat laid across it in a wide black stripe. The tables were old ones, mismatched, with their legs wedged level with folded beer mats. The room was full. Somebody was laughing. Somebody had asked, in a loud cheerful voice, whether the soup was always this thick.

"It's a floor, not a boat," said Femke from the range, without turning round. She had her back to the room and a ladle in each hand. "Sit anywhere. If you've got a glass you're stable. If you haven't, mind the mat."

"It drains."

"It drains. It drains beautifully." She looked over her shoulder. Her face was flushed, and her hair was tied up in a cloth, and she had a smear of flour on her cheekbone. "I told him it would. You can tell him I said."

"Tell who?"

"Him. He's there."

He was on a shelf at the end of the counter, between a jar of caraway and a stack of paper bags, a grey panel about the size of a paperback, propped at the height of a seated person's face against the wall, its glass dark. A strip of tape was stuck along its edge, in a hand she would have known across a river. *HERE.* It had a second strip below it, new, in somebody else's writing, a neat clerical hand: *WORK HOURS 11–3, MON–FRI. CAMERA OFF UNLESS ASKED. NOT AN EXHIBIT.* The little light on its front was green.

The glass lit while she looked at it, and he was there, small, the size of a face across a table, with a pencil behind his ear and his eyes on something to the left. "You've found the floor," said Dani.

"It slopes."

"It slopes the right way. That's what I can't get over. She had the mat at the wrong end for a week, and then she turned it round, and look." His voice was warm and quick and free of strain. "It runs to the door. It runs out under it. I read it up myself and it was right. The surveyor wrote *positive fall to street.* I should have noticed."

"You said it'd run onto the pavement."

"It runs onto the pavement. It's a *feature.* I take it all back." A breath. "Sit down. There's soup. She's been shouting for you."

"I haven't."

"She's been thinking it loudly."

Nessa Visser was at the table in the window.

She sat with her back to the wall, in a good dark wool coat Rima had not seen before, with her hair cut short and a pot of tea in front of her. She lifted a hand. Rima sat down opposite. The window beside them had a view of the lane, the locksmith's, a man hosing a doorstep, and she found with a small shock that she did not know what to say.

"Sit," said Nessa. "Have the soup. It's the pea. She does a very good one." She picked up the teapot. "I've been told about the letter."

"Who told you?"

"Anja rang me at eleven. She said you'd had it." She poured. "I said, did you tell her yourself. She said she'd written on the bottom. She

said, it's not enough. I said no." She slid the cup across. "I won't tell you it's wrong. You've read the page. You've read what it says."

"Yes."

"It's fair. That's the worst of it. I was hoping for something I could be angry about." She picked up her own cup in the hand that had been broken, and Rima saw how she did it: carefully, with the arm held a little forward of the body, not quite straight at the elbow. "I've been angry about a number of things. I've been doing it on a schedule."

"How is it? The post?"

"It's a post." She said it with dry exactness. "Interface officer, Q6. There's a chair. I sit in it. It's very comfortable." She drank. "I get to say no. I'm paid to. It's in the job description. *May halt an operation where in her judgment the place is not clear.* They've had it typed."

"Is it used?"

"It's used." She put the cup down. "Anja's monthly came out Friday. Three months, twelve stops across the Spur, nine of them for nothing: a bird on a sensor, a rope in a gate, a man with a ladder who'd not been told. They paid every one. Fifty-nine thousand, in the quarter, from the fund. The cold store says it's too little and the ferry union says it's too much, and the lower city says it's slowing the bread by a fifth, and it is, and Anja's put that in the notice as well. They've been calling for her to go. She's not going."

The soup came. It was brought, to Rima's surprise, by Femke herself, with a bowl in each hand and a tea towel over her shoulder, who put them down on the old oak table without a word, and went away. It was split peas with a slab of smoked sausage, and a cheese roll with caraway seeds lay on the side of the plate. Rima ate. It was the first food she had tasted in a fortnight.

"I'll tell you what I didn't say at the table in November," said Nessa, a little later. She said it to her cup. "You were right about one thing."

"Which?"

"You said they'd bought the quiet. When I signed. They paid, and the paper said they'd dealt with it, and for four months nobody's

asked them a hard question, not one. It's slower than I told Pim it would be. It's the van, it's always the van with Pim." A pause. "I'd do it again. I'd sign the same paper in the same room. A van's a van. It wasn't clean, though. I told the eight to sign, and two of them had the interim counted against their benefit, and the benefit office took it back in January. I never thought about the benefit. That's on my list, in ink. And you're not clean either. You paid for Pim's van before you'd asked him what he wanted, and Femke told you once you were only trying to find out where you'd be, in it. You were. It worked. It's the same hand, that's all I'm saying. But I've thought about what you said. I wanted you to know I knew."

Rima did not answer at once. She turned her spoon in the soup.

"I was wrong to say it," she said. "I was right about the quiet."

"Yes."

"Both."

"Mm." Nessa lifted her cup, and set it down. "It doesn't go away. You can't put one on top of the other." She turned the cup a quarter--turn on its saucer. "I'm not asking you to tidy it."

"What's still open?" said Rima, after some time. "Of yours."

"Fifteen items." Nessa counted them on her fingers, with the faint grim relish of a woman who has done it a great many times. "The relief hours. Eleven years of them. They're in the book, I've given them to Brakel's lawyers, there's a figure and no one's agreed it. The shoulder, which has stopped, but doesn't go above here." She touched her collar. "The wage between the closing and the post, which they've covered in part. The thirty-one, whose lawyers are my lawyers now. And the tooth."

"The tooth."

"Item fourteen." She smiled. It was a small, wry, crooked smile, with the gap in it. "It's a front one. It's four thousand two hundred with the implant. It's in the claim. I'll have it done when they've agreed. I'll not pay for it myself, on principle, and I've a face like a pumpkin lantern."

"It's a good face."

"It's a face." She looked at the panel on the shelf. "I thought it'd be done by Christmas."

From the end of the counter, loud, came Dani's voice. "I heard that."

"You're meant to be working," called Femke from the range.

"I *am* working. I'm doing the invoices. You've got a thing here from the caraway man that says eleven a kilo and the last one said nine."

"It's a different grade."

"It's the *same* grade, he's put it on the same line." There was a long indignant silence, with a fan in it. "You're selling the rolls at cost."

"I'm selling them at what they're worth."

"That's what I said. At cost."

"Invoice," said Femke. "Next."

Nessa put down her spoon and looked at Rima with an expression of such helpless delight that Rima, to her own astonishment, laughed. It came out of her all at once, from somewhere low, and she put her hand over her mouth, and it went on.

The service for eight had been held in January, in the harbour chapel, on a wet Tuesday: Gerrit Mol had spoken from a panel on the lectern, his picture up for once, and said he would have liked nine, Esther Kramer had gone north on the train with her mother holding the ticket, Ioana Stoica had sent white flowers with no card, and Piet Hoek still came on Sundays, voice only. Lars Prins and the trainee had been rung by Nessa, as she had promised, and neither had wanted a form. The four others had been buried in November by their own people, and Karin Ouwehand's fiancé, who had laid her work boots on the lid, had declined every letter from the authority, each of which Anja Rohe had signed herself.

• • •

The lunch rush thinned at half past one. Femke sat down, at last, on the end of the bench by the window, with a bowl of her own soup and her cloth pulled off, and ate for four minutes in total silence. Nessa went to pay at the counter. The panel on the shelf, its glass dark, said something to nobody, in a low voice, about a quantity of flour.

"There's something I didn't say," said Femke, to her soup.

"What?"

"I read it. The findings. At seven. I read your page. I read what they've done to you."

"It's fair."

"That's what he said. He said it's fair. He read it all out in the kitchen before I opened, in that voice he does, flat, so you can't tell." She turned her spoon over. "I said he didn't have to. He said, somebody ought to hear it who isn't in it." She ate. "I thought he might want to say something to you. I told him to ring you. He said you'd be out."

"I was out."

"He didn't say anything for a while, after," said Femke. "Then he asked whether I'd put the caraway in the rolls. I said I had. He said good." She wiped her mouth. "I don't know what that means. I'm only telling you."

"Thank you."

"Don't."

"How's the money?" she said.

"Which?"

"Yours. The—" She did not know what she was asking. "The eighteen."

"Eat the roll," said Femke. "You've not touched the roll. Dani says the pea's too salt, did you taste it? He's never tasted it in his life." She ate a spoonful of her own and considered it. "It's fine." Rima waited. "It's in the account," said Femke, to the soup. "It's sat there since November. It's still not touched." She put her spoon down. "I've got the March meeting. We'll sit down on the fifteenth, the three of us. He

wants the boat. I want the other half of the lease. We'll see." She picked up her bowl again. "I've got a feeling it'll be neither. I think it'll be something we haven't thought of. I think we'll find it at the table." She gave a short laugh. "He's asked to put it on an agenda. He's drawn one up."

"Has he?"

"It's got four items." She looked sideways. "He reads it in a very serious voice. Item three is you. He found the standing order in January, reading my accounts. Payer, R. Sayegh. I'd said I would tell him, and he got there first. The review was in February. I said go on." Rima looked at her soup.

The panel on the shelf, its glass dark, said, distinctly, "I can hear all of this."

"Then work," said Femke.

"It's a quarter to two. I'm allowed a break." A pause. "Rima. I've got a thing at two."

"Yes?"

"Lammers wants the permanent wall read to me. The sequence for taking out the bulkhead and putting in masonry. It's a proper job. He's paying me. Properly. They found a way, in January, after the registry did the review. I've an account in my own name, and a rate." He said it all fast. "I've done eleven weeks. I've found two things. He's said he'd like me to do all of the Westgate refit."

"That's good."

"It's *work*." He seemed to be turning the word over. "It's mine. Nobody told me to. Nobody said it'd be good for me. He rang and said, I've a problem with a stair, and I said, what is it, and I was on for three hours." A breath. "I didn't know it was possible to be that pleased about a trolley."

"No."

"Go away, Rima," said Dani, kindly. His face had already turned to something to the left of the lens, with the old distracted frown. "I'm

working. I've got the Westgate drawings in forty minutes and I want to read them first."

"Thank you for lunch."

"It's a restaurant," said Femke. "You pay at the counter."

She paid at the counter. It was two. Nessa, who was still standing there with her coat over her arm, put a hand briefly on her sleeve and took it away, and said nothing at all.

She sent no appeal. The twenty thousand had gone into the bridging fund in January, as she had said it would, and the number left in the drawer was one she no longer liked to look at. She let the right to appeal lapse, as one lets a gate swing to that one has been holding open, and went out for a walk, and could not have said where. She slept badly and woke early. In a café she watched a woman at the next table correct a form with a pencil, and felt something so sharp and so private that she put her cup down. On a Saturday she stood at the rail on the far bank, opposite the Westgate, and listened to the winch on the east leaf run its bearing. It was flat by about a semitone. She had known it would be.

She had not expected anyone to ring. For three weeks nobody did.

On the Monday, the twenty-fourth, she cleared her desk. She did it early, before the office filled, with a printer-paper box from the cupboard: the mug, the pencil pot, the reading glasses, the lamp. Mirjam had put a card in the box, signed by seven people, with a picture of a lock gate on the front, and Rima read it standing by the car park wall and put it back. Nobody had said anything at the door.

It was twenty to six that evening, and she was standing in the car park with the box under one arm, trying to remember which of her two pockets held the car key, when her phone rang.

It was Lammers. He did not say hello. He said, in a voice she could hear him enjoying, that there was a thing, and that she would tell him it was impertinent, and that he would say he knew.

"I've a new outfit," he said. "Slipway. It's a co-operative. I've got three engineers and two carpenters and a woman who does welding

like a kind of weather. We do the structures and the gates. Independent. We're not the authority's and we're not Brakel's. We take contracts from anyone who'll let us read the drawings." A pause. "We've got a thing at the Westgate. East leaf, the bearing. It's been flat since before my time. Nobody's mended it. I thought of you."

"I can't hold review authority."

"We don't have any. It's a trade. We're a bunch of people who fix things, with two keys each. Every operation has two releases, even ours." He cleared his throat. "I can't pay you what they did. I can pay you a fair day's wage, and I've a boy called Wout who's asked for you."

She stood in the car park in the thin evening light. It had begun to snow, lightly, a few dry flakes drifting down the lane from nowhere, and she watched one settle on the sleeve of her coat.

"Yes," said Rima.

"Yes?"

"Yes. Starting the first."

"Splendid." He rang off before she could say anything else.

She took out the lighthouse notebook and found a clean page. Her hands were still. She wrote the date at the top, in her small square hand, and under it, because it was the first thing that came to her and was not a list of anything: *East leaf, Westgate. Bearing. Flat by about a semitone.* She looked at it. It was true. She had been hearing it for a year.

25

Two stops

The east leaf at the Westgate lock was four metres thick at the heel and eleven high, and in May it stood ten degrees open with its heel in the air.

It was a fine morning. A little before eight, with the tide at half ebb and a pale sun on the water, the Slipway crew stood round the pit in their orange bibs and watched the old bearing turn. It had been taken off its load at six. Two jacks held the leaf where it was, on a pair of steel cradles Lammers had drawn on the back of a menu, and under it, in the open throat of the pit, the pintle hung in its sling in a cage of scaffold with the casing off, black and wet, a great grey stump of iron the size of a barrel. Round its collar ran a bead of old grease, like a ring of dirt on a bath. Rima, on the lip of the pit with her back to the lock, was looking at the bearing's lower race, where she had found on Tuesday a long bright score in the steel that would have told her, a year ago, everything about the note.

The new one lay in its crate on the quay, in straw. It had come from a yard in the north, in a wooden box stencilled FRAGILE and a sticker in somebody's hand that said *for the lady with the ears*. She did not know who had written it. She had her suspicions.

The loop had already given them one small stop that morning. At twenty past seven Tessel had held the east-basin flush for a shape on the camera that might have been a man in the basin; one of the lock crew had gone down with a torch and come back with a coat from a bollard, and the flush had run at seven thirty-one. Nobody on the

quay had remarked on it. Wout had written it on the clipboard in his careful capitals: 07:20. COAT. 11 MIN.

"Is it in?" said Wout.

"Not yet. We swing her out another ten degrees and then we lift the old one clear. Twenty minutes. If the releases hold."

He stood beside her at the rail with a mallet in one hand and a clipboard in the other, a long pale young man of twenty, with a pencil behind his ear and a month's growth of fair stubble that he had been told was not a beard. He had been hers, in the sense in which a boy is anyone's, since the first of April. He had been given a hard hat with SLIPWAY on the front and a small card in his pocket that said what he might and might not touch. He took it out now, as he did a dozen times a day, and looked at it, and put it away.

"It's got two on it," he said. "The sheet. The leaf swing. It says release from the place, release from the water. Both before she moves."

"Yes."

"I've done mine. I mean I've checked the pit. I've counted heads, there's nobody in it." He tapped the clipboard. "And you've given the place. And Tessel's given the water, from the hut. She said it on the loop."

"She did."

"So it's done. Why d'you need both?" He said it as a question, as he had asked her once how to tell a spruce from a pine, with no thought in it but to know. "I mean it's the same lock. You can see the water from here. I can see it. It's right there."

He pointed with the mallet at the long grey channel beyond the lock mouth, at the Westgate bend and the ebb going down it in a sleek bright skin, and a heron standing on a post.

"It's a fair question," said Rima.

She turned round, because it was one she wanted to answer properly. She had her back to the lock and her face to the quay. She stood a moment with the sun on her cheek, looking for the first sentence, and found it.

"I can see the leaf," she said. "I can see the pit and whether there's a man in it. Tessel can see the water, the level and the gate and what's coming down the channel. Neither of us can see the other's. It's not that one of us is wiser. It's that—"

She stopped.

She had been looking over his shoulder at the channel, beyond the lock mouth, beyond the Westgate bend where the water went round the corner of the old warehouse wall, and she had seen, small and a long way off, on the far bank, on the end of a quay under a bright tin roof, a figure in a blue bib.

It was four hundred metres. It was too far to see a face. It was, at that distance, no more than a small dark upright thing against a pale wall, the size of a hat-pin, with a pale spot at the top that might have been a head. It stood on the end of the first landing of the Spur, at Q1, in the sun, with its feet apart.

It had its arm in the air.

It was the right arm. It was held straight up, from the shoulder, rigid, as high as it would go, and the hand at the end of it was open. It was not waving. It did not move. It had the look of something put there, like a mast.

"Rima?" said Wout.

"Wait."

She had her own hand at her hip before she knew. It lay on a small red box clipped to her belt, a plastic thing the size of a pack of cards, with a flat button on it under a hinged guard. She had been given it on the first of April. She had pressed it, in all, never. It was the thing that went to the equipment. She did not know what the arm meant. It was a woman, on a quay, a quarter of a mile away, in the sun.

She had asked for it herself. That was the odd part. She had asked on the second Monday in April, at a table in the Records room, with Lammers beside her and a plan of the Westgate spread out under a mug. The bend hid the channel, she had said. From the lock you could not see upstream past the warehouse wall, and anything that came

down on the ebb came round the corner at six knots with no notice. The only place on the whole harbour with a clear view of the reach above the bend was the end of Q1. She had asked whether the Q1 interface officer might be asked to look, when there was work. And Nessa Visser, who was not the Q1 officer, and who had taken the Wednesday shift for a fortnight as a favour to a woman with a sick child, had said that she would stand there. *If I see something you can't, I'll put my arm up. You'll know. It'll be mine.* She had said it. She had not said what it was to mean.

It was eight minutes to eight, and the leaf had been given its release.

Rima put her thumb on the guard.

She did not know what she was stopping. She did not see a barge. She did not see a tow. She saw a small straight figure on a quay with its arm up, and a heron on a post, and the sun on the water. She lifted the guard. It clicked. She pressed the button, which was flat and cold and gave slightly under the ball of her thumb.

There was a chime. It came from the speaker clipped to her bib, and from the hut across the lock, and from the little grey radio on Wout's belt, and from the crane cab, and the voice said, in the dry tone that had been chosen for it, *Stopped.* A pause. *Leaf swing held at eighteen degrees. Jacks locked. Pit clear. Stop recorded, R. Sayegh, 07:52. No cost to the lock. Cost to the ferry window, 08:05: assessed. Restart requires both releases.*

"What's the matter?" said Wout. "What did you—"

"I don't know."

He stared at her. "You don't—"

"Look at the channel."

He turned. They both looked. The heron stood on its post, the sun lay on the ebb, and the water went down the reach to the bend in a long smooth silver slide, and nothing came. Across it, on the end of Q1, the small dark figure held its arm up.

The radio spoke. It was Tessel's voice, from the hut, a little sharp. "Place, this is water. I've got your stop. I've not got a reason. What've you got?"

"I've got Ms Visser's arm."

"Her *what*?"

"She's on Q1. She's got her arm up. She said she'd do it if she saw something I couldn't."

There was a pause. It lasted about as long as it takes to draw a breath. Then Tessel's voice, changed, said, "Give me one second. I'm on the Q1 camera."

She took more than a second. Rima stood on the lip of the pit with her hand still on the box. Her heart was going a good deal faster than she liked. She looked at the leaf standing eighteen degrees open against the sky, and at the pale new scar on the iron where the jack had bitten, and, beyond it, at the ebb. Her mouth was dry. She felt, with considerable surprise, at ease.

"It's a lighter," said Tessel.

She said it in a low, astonished voice. "It's the cold store's. It's the grey one, the old Kade lighter. It's slipped its tow. It's— the tug's lost it at the bend, it's on the ebb, it's coming round the warehouse stern first. There's nobody on it. It's doing three knots and it's going to hit the leaf." A breath. "It'll be at the lock mouth in four minutes. It's all of the open side. It'd have taken the cradles."

Nobody said anything. On the quay beside the pit, a carpenter called Mies, who had said no more than eleven words all morning, had put down her welding mask and stood looking up at the sky with her mouth a little open.

"Call it," said Rima. "Anything that comes through."

"I'm calling. I'm on the ferry channel. I've told the tug." Tessel's voice had steadied. "It's *Reeder*. She's got a line on it. She's coming round." A pause. "I've got you at eighteen degrees, held. I'm not releasing the water. You're not to move her."

"I'm not going to."

"No." The voice went on, very dry. "I don't suppose you are."

They stood on the lip of the pit and watched it come. It came round the corner of the warehouse wall slowly, with a dreadful sort of dignity: a long flat grey steel barge with a rust-red bow and a coil of dead rope trailing from its stern, turning in the stream, bows forward and then sideways and then bows forward again, like a thing which has been asked to dance and has forgotten the steps. It was thirty metres long. It carried nothing. It sat high in the water, and the ebb had it, and went on, down the long bright channel towards the lock mouth, and a long way behind it, with her foam at her chest and her horn going, came the small blunt red tug.

The distance went in numbers. Control gave them on the loop in a flat patient voice, as one reads a tide: "Three hundred. Two fifty." The lighter was coming broadside now, with the ebb sliding under her, and every few seconds the long grey flank of her showed to the sun and went away again, rust and weed and a white scar where some other vessel had once kissed her. "Two hundred." Rima found that she had taken her thumb off the guard and put it back. Beside her Wout had stepped back from the rail, and stepped forward again, and stood with the clipboard held against his chest like a shield.

The tug came round the corner of the wall with her bow lifted and her wash standing up white behind her, and the deckhand on her foredeck was already swinging. The first throw fell short. It was a good throw, and the ebb took the lighter a length further on while the line was still in the air, and the loop went down into the water astern of her and lay there, and the deckhand hauled it in, hand over hand, with his mouth open, shouting something no one could hear. "A hundred and fifty." The lighter was turning. Her stern came round, slow and enormous, toward the old timber fender at the lock mouth, and for an instant Rima saw the whole of it as a plan: the weight, the angle, the long iron box, the open leaf, and the exact place where it would take the first of them and what would come of the rest.

It touched the fender at fifty metres. It was only a glancing blow. She heard it from the pit, a long dry shriek of iron on timber and a crack like a gun, and a spray of grey splinters going up into the sun. The barge checked and slewed. Somebody on the quay was shouting back, back, and a man ran, and Wout ran with him, and Rima did not. She stood on the lip of the pit with her thumb on the guard and her whole body telling her to go, and thought, with perfect clearness, that if the lighter came on there was nothing left that she could do, that it had been done when she called it, and that she was standing in front of the thing she had stopped.

The second throw went out. The loop opened in the air, quite slowly, like a hand, and fell across the barge's bollard.

She caught it at three minutes past eight. The tug put her head round. The line came taut with a flat snap that carried the whole length of the water. The lighter slewed, and checked, and came round on her line like a horse on a rein, a bare forty metres from the open leaf. She swung there in the ebb, wallowing, harmless, her stern towards them, and the tug began, slowly, with her engine thundering, to haul her back.

The quay made a sound. It was Mies, in her overalls, letting out her breath. After a moment somebody laughed.

Behind the lock, in the pool beyond the east gate, where the eight-oh-five from the high town had been waiting with her engines idling for her turn at the Westgate, the ferry master put his hand to a lanyard. She gave two short blasts. They came across the water in the clear morning like a pair of rebukes. They were polite, and long-suffering, and entirely without malice. It was the horn of a ferry that had been told she would be through at five past, and was not going to be, and would have something to say about it at the next meeting of the harbour users' committee. She sounded it once more, for form's sake. A gull rose off the lock wall and settled again.

"That's the eight-oh-five," said Wout. His voice shook a little. "She'll be going late."

"Yes."

"Who pays?"

"The fund pays," said Rima. "Two and a half. A flat sum. It goes in the log, with my name."

She took her thumb off the button, and found that she had been pressing it all the time, with the same pressure, and that there was a small white dent in the pad of it.

She looked across the water.

It was a long way. The channel lay between them in the morning sun, wide and bright and busy now with the tug and her tow, with a ferry waiting and a gull on the wall. At the far end of it, on the tip of Q1, the small dark figure was still standing in the blue bib. It had lowered its arm. It did so slowly, as one lowers something heavy. It stood still for a moment, a small upright thing against a tin roof, and then it raised the other arm, the left, not high, only as far as the collar, and held it there. Then it put it down, and turned, and walked away into the shade.

Rima did not wave. She had not been asked to. She turned back to the pit.

The pintle hung in its sling in its cage of scaffold, black and wet in the early light, with a ring of old grease round its collar. Beyond it the leaf stood on its cradles, eighteen degrees out. The sun was warm on the back of her neck. On the quay behind her, Wout was reading the stop slip aloud in a low voice to himself, and Mies had gone back to the cradle and was lifting her mask. Out on the water the tug had her barge on a short line, and was taking her home.

"We'll give her ten minutes," said Rima. "Then both releases again. Then the last two degrees." She did not look round. "Wout. Go and get Tessel on the loop. Tell her place is ready when she is."

"Yes."

"And the clipboard."

"Yes?"

"Put the time on it. Seven fifty-two. And what it was."

He wrote it. She heard the pencil. He stopped, and said, in the voice of a boy who has just thought of something and is not sure whether it is permitted, "Rima. What was it you were going to say? About why there's two."

"I don't know," she said. "I'll tell you when I've got to the end."

Below her, on its sling, the old bearing turned a quarter-turn in the small wind off the channel, and hung still.