20,000 Leagues Under the Sea

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The smelly harbor bar

The pub door was jammed, as if it had decided yesterday to deny entry to anyone with a spark of common sense. I kicked it, and it gave way with a pitiful sound somewhere between a rusty violin and a dying seagull. Inside, the air hung like old, damp bread in a trash can. Smoke, sweat, the cheapest rum. Sawdust on the floor, long since overwhelmed by what men lose from their stomachs and pockets when the night chews the teeth out of their heads. The windows were fogged up, as if the ocean had put its fingers to the panes and asked if anyone wanted to live in here anymore. I didn't believe it.

Conseil followed me, slightly bent over, his hands in his pockets, as if that way he could keep the world at bay. His eyes were those of a dog that has seen too much and yet can't stay mad at anyone, not even a kick in the side. He mumbled something about the rain, about the prices, about his knee, which hadn't worked properly since a fight in Marseille. I didn't listen to him. I listened to the storm in the bar: glasses clinked, laughter burst out and fell dead, voices tumbled over one another like drunks who miss the stairs. A dive, yes, but more honest than most living rooms, where misery only wears better clothes.

The landlord was a man with the face of an old buoy, pale skin, red veins, the look of a harbor policeman who's seen you vomit too many times. He wiped with a cloth that only added a new layer of dirt and nodded to me as if I weren't here for the first time. Maybe I wasn't. Sometimes every bar feels like a continuation of the same long, wrong night. I ordered rum. He put a glass in front of me that tasted like the medicine that sickness loves. I drank. My throat burned, and for a few seconds the world was clear: glass, hand, throat, fire. Then the fog returned.

Conseil had already slid next to me, staring at the bottle label as if it might make for a better resume. He drank, shook himself, drank again. His face flushed, a hint of anger jutted his chin forward. I knew that look; he said: if someone pushes me now, I'll push back, and if they don't push, I'll push first.

At the end of the bar sat a man with an eye that looked like it had once been a marble caught under someone's boot. He gripped the glass so tightly he seemed to be strangling it. Beside him was a bundle of wet rope, a jacket that couldn't decide whether it wanted to be on or off, and a smell reminiscent of the inside of a barrel filled with bad decisions. He wasn't talking to anyone, but his mouth was moving, and the words fell back into his glass.

The storm outside grew louder. The roof answered with its own rumble, and somewhere in the middle of the room, someone laughed too far, too high, and too long, until two others took it personally. Chairs scraped, bodies straightened, and I knew what was coming next. Fights are like the tides; you can set your watch by them, and no one is surprised when the water level rises. Conseil shrugged his shoulders and looked at me. I shook my head, but it was no use.

The first blows flew, still uncertain, like lousy seagulls, and then landed, as always. A glass shattered, a pitcher followed, and the barman roared, not because he had anything against violence, but against broken glass. A sailor with tattooed hands, the lines of a failed treasure plot, fell between two tables and lay there as if he had finally found a place where gravity made sense. Someone stepped over him. Someone else kicked him. Conseil flexed his fingers, I put my hand on his arm. Leave it, I said. He left it, for now.

My rum was gone too quickly. I ordered another, and the barman refilled it as if he were pouring oil into an engine he wasn't going to fix. I asked him if he'd heard anything about that thing out there, that story that was creeping up and down the harbor like a plague: A monster, they said. A shadow beneath the waves, faster than the wind and more malicious than the rudder. The barman shrugged. There are plenty of monsters around here, he said, and looked at me as if he meant all of us.

The one-eyed wreck at the end of the bar suddenly started talking, this time so loudly that the words found their way from his glass into the world. You idiots, he said, you have no idea. It's not a monster. It's a ship. A damned ship that doesn't need air. He raised his glass like an oracle and drank it dry. The room listened for a breath, then everything recoiled again as if nothing had been said. But something stuck inside me, a barb of curiosity.

I pushed my glass away and slid closer to him. A ship without air, I repeated, and he grinned as if I'd just asked him a question he'd been waiting to answer for twenty years. A ship that moves beneath us through the night, he said. A fish made of iron, with teeth made of headlights. It steals the calm from your bones when you pass over it, and you only realize later that something's wrong. They call it something different, depending on who you ask. Some say it's the devil in a can. Others say it's the future when it decides to eat us.

And who's driving this thing, I asked, my tone casual, but my heart moved as if someone had shortened the leash. The man blinked his good eye, then scratched his cheek. A captain, he said, so dryly as if he'd invented the word

himself and then forgotten it. A man who doesn't want a name. One who's sick of the world because it's sick of him. I've seen him, he swore. Once, when we found a wreck that was still warm. He stood there in the water, like a stone, with a knife in his hand, looking at us as if we were the detritus the tide brings. A smile without teeth. You see him and you know it doesn't get any better.

The fight was getting closer, as if it had decided to turn our conversation into a stage set. Someone fell against me, one shoulder like a battering ram, and my glass tipped. I grabbed the guy by the shirt and pushed him back, not gently, and he fell into a group that was already ending an argument by losing it. Suddenly, fists were in the air, as if someone were releasing pigeons. Conseil jumped up, and I thought, well, it's too late now.

But the one-eyed man remained calm, as if it were all just background music for his private performance. He leaned forward. They call him Nemo, he said. Nobody. That's how he introduces himself, if he speaks at all. He laughed, and it sounded broken. Nobody is as honest a name as nobody. Fitting for a man who's been everywhere and belongs nowhere. He raised his index finger, waggling it as if preaching. Remember this: When Nobody appears, others disappear.

Nemo, I repeated, and the word was strange at first, then suddenly very close, like a face you recognize in a mirror without knowing why. The man stared into his empty glass. One of us once sailed close to him, he said, just below the waterline. We thought it was a whale with a damned funnel. Then something flashed, and our boat had a hole that no one could plug. Three men went down. The sea remembered their names better than we did.

The bar was now in a frenzy. Someone smashed a bottle on the bar, the barman roared, and Conseil caught the momentum of an attacker, twisted him, and sent him tumbling. I stood up, stepped between two blunt heads, took an elbow in the ribs, and returned it, a dance you don't learn but inherit when you've watched people kiss the ground often enough. The air lacked the word for peace, but you can also survive in silence.

When the worst of the noise was over, the audience trickled back into their seats like seawater through a leak, slowly but inexorably. The landlord looked over the damage, groaning as if he himself were the broken bottle. I sat down, breathed, and the one-eyed oracle had a new drink by now, no idea where from. I asked him about proof, about more than stories, about something you could touch. He shrugged. Evidence, he said, is the jewelry of the rich. We have scars. He rolled up his sleeve, revealing a wound on his forearm, jagged like a

map of islands that never see land. One of his men gave me that, he said. Or he himself. Who can tell the difference?

Conseil was beside me again, his breathing like a jammed saw. I told him Nemo's name, quietly, as if it were a password. He repeated it, tasted it, and grimaced. Nobody, he said. Suits us. I snorted, ordered another rum, and this time it burned less, perhaps because I was already burning myself.

Outside, the rain lashed against the panes, and the wind ripped into the cracks as if searching for a way in. I thought of the ships fighting out there tonight, of men spitting out their last prayers like toothpicks. I thought of iron underwater, of searchlight eyes and knife hands, of a man who had deliberately lost his name. The sea was a belly that devoured everything, and some of the things it spat out weren't thanked.

The innkeeper turned down the lanterns, but no one took that as a sign to leave. It was the kind of night you stay until you have to leave because you can't stand any longer. The window opened in a sudden gust of wind, and a wet handful of air reached in. Someone cursed, someone laughed, and I saw my reflection between the drops: pale skin, dark circles under his eyes like crabs with their teeth stuck. I didn't like the guy, but he could drink, and that was enough for the moment.

The one-eyed wreck had meanwhile risen to a chorus, telling of wrecks suddenly clean, as if someone had gutted them like fish, of corpses with strange cuts, of nets that no longer knew their own knots. I listened half-aloud, pretending I wasn't. Stories nestle like water in wood. You only notice when everything swells up.

At some point, I got up from the stool. Conseil followed, his eyes still sharp, his hands now steady. We pushed open the jammed door, and night struck us, with a wind that stank like algae and rain that turned the street into a slate-gray gully. Behind us, the pub hummed on, a machine that knows only two states: too loud or off. I pulled my coat tighter, as if I had something to protect.

Nemo, I said into the rain, just to test whether the word would sound different outside than inside. It didn't. It was a short, persistent sound, something that wouldn't go away. The road led us down to the harbor, where the masts scraped the sky even in the dark. I thought of what waited beneath the surface, of the things that don't show up and do so precisely because of that, and I knew the name would stick with me. Some words are hooks, and you are the fish.

We continued walking until the pub was just a dirty glow behind us. The wind pushed us, the night drew on, and somewhere outside, something was moving that wasn't the rain and wasn't the wind. Perhaps just the imagination that had always drunk too much. Perhaps a piece of the future, pushing past me. I lifted my face, letting the rain wash away everything that threatened to stick. But the name remained. Nemo. A nobody who leaves all traces behind.

The next morning smelled worse than the night. I woke up on a bench by the harbor, my coat half over me, half in a puddle. My head pounded like a rusty ship's bell, rung every minute by some sadistic sailor. Conseil lay curled up next to me, like a dog who had decided he'd rather be a cat in his next life. His snoring sounded like rusty bellows, and that was almost reassuring, because it meant he was still alive.

The sun hadn't bothered to creep over the rooftops. It hung there like a tired whore who'd already worn too many layers. Everything was gray, wet, and sticky. Fishing boats came back, men with eyes that looked like they hadn't slept in twenty years. They trudged past us, throwing nets onto the ground, salt still clinging to them, as if to prove the sea really existed. The stench of rotten fish mingled with my own staleness. Together, they created a symphony that would have sent Mozart into the gutter.

I pulled myself to my feet, kneaded my temples, and felt the previous evening return like an oil slick: the bar, the one-eyed man, his stories about a damned ship that wasn't allowed to be a ship. The words buzzed around in my skull like flies that didn't notice the window was closed. Nemo. Nobody. A name that clings to you like a debt you never paid.

"Rum?" asked Conseil, his eyes now half-open, as if he were expecting me to pull a bottle from my coat like a faith healer. I laughed dryly, the laughter hurting more than it did good. "We need something stronger," I said, "coffee or a punch in the face." He grinned crookedly and offered me both. I took neither.

The harbor was alive, though none of the men looked like they wanted to live. Merchants shouted, seagulls screamed louder, children ran between barrels and ropes as if they had nothing to lose. I looked around and noticed that more people were staring at us than usual. Maybe it was because we looked like two stranded people, maybe because the name Nemo wasn't just haunting my head.

We returned to the pub because you always return to the place where you fell the hardest. The door jammed again, as if saying, "Not again, boys." But it gave

way, and inside it was almost as if the night had never passed. The same faces, the same glasses, just a little more tired and fewer teeth. The landlord was wiping with the same rag, which long ago deserved a biography. He nodded at us, unsurprised, as if we were pieces of furniture that had been moved and then found again.

The one-eyed man was still sitting at the bar, or maybe already back. I couldn't tell. He looked as if he'd occupied the same seat for weeks and had slowly grown into the wood. A new glass was in front of him, and his lips were moving, but this time I only heard fragments: "Deep... iron... knife..." Words that didn't smack of coincidence.

I sat down next to him, Conseil staying close behind me like a shadow refusing to crawl into the ground. "Nemo," I said quietly, as if it were a password, and immediately he stopped murmuring. His eyes fixed on me, and I felt like I was staring into a hole that grew deeper the longer I looked.

"He already has you in his mind," he growled, "you just don't realize it yet." His voice was scratchy, like ropes snapping on a rusty edge. "You're not avoiding him anymore. No one does. Not once you've said his name."

"Bullshit," Conseil said, but his voice trembled. He believed more than he wanted to admit.

The one-eyed man chuckled, a sound that knew no humor. "Bullshit? Sure. But bullshit is what we all eat, day after day. And his tastes like iron." He took a long drag and slammed the glass on the counter, nearly shattering it. "I've seen men disappear. Entire boats. No storm, no battle, just silence. A silence that smelled of oil."

The innkeeper muttered something, so quietly that it was hard to tell whether he meant it seriously or was just trying to fill the silence between the words. "Don't speak too loudly," he murmured, "the sea hears more than we think."

I laughed crookedly. "The sea hears? The sea eats, that's all." But deep down, I knew the story stuck. It was as if someone had driven a nail into my head, and every time I moved, it rubbed against the bone.

The door opened, and a gust of wind blew the smoke aside. A sailor stumbled in, wet to the bone, his eyes wide as if he'd seen something that had swallowed his pupils. He didn't scream. He didn't speak. He just stood there, dripping, trembling, and all heads turned. Then he fell over, right into the sawdust.

At first, no one moved. Then two men rushed to him and turned him over. His face was pale, his lips blue. A strange scar was stuck to his chest, oblong, like a cut from something that wasn't a knife. One of the men cursed, another made the sign of the cross. I approached, Conseil behind me. The scar glistened as if someone had just inked it.

“Greetings from below,” murmured the one-eyed man, and I swore he was grinning.

The bar was silent. For a few seconds, the only sound was the dripping of water from the sailor's clothes onto the floor. Drip, drip, drip—like a beat reminding the world that it should have stopped. Then the murmuring erupted, voices atop each other, wild, panicked, half drunk, half convinced.

Nemo. The word was spoken by different people, in different tones. Nemo. Nobody. But everyone knew it meant someone.

I looked at the sailor, his body already half cold, and thought: Maybe this is the invitation. Maybe Nemo isn't knocking, but is just sending a letter, written in scars.

The rum still burned in my stomach, but suddenly it tasted like the sea. A sea that was waiting for me.

The dead sailor still lay on the floor, as if he'd decided the pub was a better grave than the sea. No one dared to take him out. The landlord glanced nervously at the door, but did nothing. Perhaps he knew it was pointless to get rid of the body—the sea would reclaim it anyway, and until then, it belonged to us. A grim guest who was no longer paying the bill.

Conseil bent down and touched the fabric of the shirt. Wet, cold, but no ordinary death. He murmured that he'd seen something like this before, off the coast of Brest, when fishermen were found with strange wounds that no knife or harpoon could explain. I asked him if he wanted to play doctor now. He just shook his head, as if the whole world were too heavy on his shoulders.

The one-eyed man grinned. That grin made me nervous, as if he were pleased that the stories were true—or worse, that they were coming true. "See?" he yelled into the gloom, "Nobody's struck again! Further proof, you goddamn doubters!" The men at the bar shifted restlessly on their stools, some cursing, some praying, all drinking faster.

The sound of glasses clinking on wood mingled with the storm outside. The rain drummed against the windows as if it wanted to get in. I could smell the ocean, even though the bar absorbed every other stench. It was as if the sea had bought a ticket to watch the performance.

The dead sailor suddenly had a voice—not really, of course. But in my head he spoke:*You're next if you keep muttering the name.*I shook my head and took a deep swig of rum, but the feeling remained. Nemo was no longer a person, but a thought that would poison you if you listened to it for too long.

Conseil looked at me askance. "We should get out of here," he whispered. "It stinks of trouble, more than usual." But my legs were glued to the ground. I knew if I left now, the name would follow me through every street, every bottle, every bed. So I stayed.

A man at the window, an old sea dog with a gray beard and eyes as murky as harbor water, suddenly raised his voice: "I saw it last week! Something under the ship, faster than any current. It kissed the keel like a lover and nearly capsized us. Not a whale, not a shark. It was metal. I swear by my mother!" His words broke as he said "Mother," and he drank the rest to drown his shame.

The mood shifted. Fear turned to anger. Men shouted among themselves, asking if it was a myth, if someone was playing a joke on us all, if it was just the booze spinning stories. Fists clenched, not against each other, but against the invisible thing lurking beneath the waves.

The bartender finally banged a club on the bar, so loud that even the storm paused for a moment. "Enough!" he shouted. "You want stories? Fine. But not in my pub! Nemo won't pay me a damn penny, so shut up!" His voice trembled, and that only made it more believable.

But it was too late. The name had been spoken, too often, too loudly. It now hung in the air like smoke, creeping, biting, impossible to get rid of. Nemo. The nobody who grabbed us all by the throat without even being here.

Conseil tugged on my sleeve, but I remained frozen. I stared at the dead man, the scar on his chest, the salt in his beard, and I thought: Maybe this is exactly what Nemo wants. For us to talk about him until we summon him. Maybe he's not a captain, not a human being. Maybe he's just an addiction, worse than rum, worse than hashish, worse than anything the harbor streets have to offer.

And I realized how addicted I was already.

The corpse lay there like a forgotten piece of furniture, and no one had the guts to touch it. Instead, they ordered more rum. That's how life works in the harbor: if something stinks, you pour alcohol on it until it becomes more bearable. The bar transformed into a sweating beast trying to drown its own fears. I drank along, not because I was thirsty, but because I had to defend myself. Against the thoughts that gnawed at me like rats in a damp basement.

At one point, Conseil pulled me aside, his eyes red, his breath full of liquor. "Stop devouring that name so greedily," he hissed. "You've been addicted to it for a long time. Nemo here, Nemo there. Soon you'll be dreaming of him, and when you wake up, he'll be there." I laughed, a dry bark, but deep down I knew he was right. The name rolled between my teeth like a marble, sweet and bitter at the same time.

At the bar, the one-eyed man began his sermon again. He said Nemo had already torn ships apart, swallowing entire crews, like a shark tired of fish. "I saw the Nautilus hurtle through the depths, silently, like a knife through soft skin," he said, his eyes glowing with feverish conviction. "And I swear, he laughed. He laughed while the wood broke and men screamed. Who laughs in the sea when there's blood? Only one: Nemo."

The guests listened, even those pretending not to. Everyone hung on his words like a drop of morphine. One shouted at him to shut up. Another shouted at him to tell more. And then they had their fists raised. It took less than a minute before the second fight of the night broke out. Glasses flew, teeth splintered, blood dripped onto the sawdust.

I stood in the middle, part of me wanting to intervene, the other just wanting to see where this would lead. Nemo was like a curse creeping through the air, setting the men against each other. Every blow, every bottle shattering on a skull, was an echo of something greater out at sea.

Conseil grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me toward the door. "Enough," he yelled in my ear, "we've heard enough. Any longer, and you're lost." I let myself be pulled, but my eyes remained glued to the one-eyed man. The man grinned bloodily, a gap in his mouth, but unbroken. "He'll get you, stranger," he called after me. "You already belong to him."

Outside, the rain lashed us in the face as if it wanted to sweep us off the pier. The storm lashed, the water splashed over the quayside, and in the distance I saw the black backs of the ships, like sleeping giants that could rise at any moment. I inhaled the salty air, coughed, and there it was: the feeling that

something was lurking down there. Not just stories, not just booze. Something real. Something that knew we had spat its name into the night.

I swore I saw a light between the waves for a moment. A narrow, cold beam, as if someone were winking at me from below. Just a blink of an eye, and it was gone. Conseil yelled at me to move on, but I stayed standing for another breath.

And I whispered: “Nemo.”

The wind ripped the words from my lips, carried them out to sea, where they would take root somewhere. I knew it was too late.

The rain pounded us like the fist of an angry god, but I stood as if nailed to the ground. Conseil cursed, tugged at my sleeve, but my legs wouldn't obey. There was something out there in the black water, I swore. Maybe just an illusion, maybe just the effects of too much cheap rum, but my heart pumped as if it had recognized something my mind couldn't yet grasp.

"Damn it, come on!" Conseil barked, his voice half rage, half fear. "If you stare much longer, the sea will eat you. Or worse: spit you out!" He pulled, and I tore myself away. My gaze was glued to the waves, which slapped like torn mouths. And there—that flash again. A narrow strip of light, so straight and hard that it couldn't possibly be just moonlight. No reflection, no flash. It was cold, artificial, like the eye of a predator.

I felt my throat go dry, even as the rain flooded my tongue. "Did you see that?" I asked Conseil, almost pleadingly. He narrowed his eyes, staring into the darkness, then shook his head. "All I see are damn waves. You're drunk as a wreck. Let's get out of here before we drown."

But I knew there was more. The sea wasn't laughing, the sea doesn't lie. It shows you something and hopes you'll look away—and if you stare anyway, you're lost. I could almost hear the giggles, a metallic whisper breaking through the thunder of the storm:*Nemo.*

We finally trudged across the quay, past barrels, crates, and dead seagulls that the wind had tossed onto the cobblestones. Every step was a struggle, and yet it felt like we weren't heading home, but heading to him. My shoes were soaking wet, my lungs were burning, and I couldn't stop thinking about that damned jet.

We found refuge in a warehouse, half-collapsed, its windows nailed shut, its doors warped. Inside, it smelled of wet wood, tar, and the urine of men who had missed the way to the latrine. We threw ourselves onto old sails and let the storm rage outside. Conseil was gone immediately, his snoring rising like the wheezing of a dying man.

I, on the other hand, couldn't sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the sailor in the pub, his strange wound. I saw the glitter in the water. I saw the toothless grin of the one-eyed man. I heard his voice, over and over again:*When nobody appears, others disappear.*

At some point, I rummaged in my bag and found paper and a pencil. My hands were shaking, but I wrote the name: Nemo. Only five letters, yet they felt as if they had weight. I stared at the word, and for a moment, I thought it moved. Slowly, like a snake writhing. I blinked, and it was silent again. Just writing. But in my gut, I knew I'd just conjured something.

I lay back, pulling the sail over me, while the storm pounded against the roof. Sleep didn't come, only a shiver that went deeper than the cold. It was the certainty that the sea had found a new toy—and it was my name.

The night was a single coughing fit. The rain pounded so relentlessly against the wooden planks of the warehouse that it sounded like a thousand nails being hammered in simultaneously. Conseil turned next to me, muttering something about home, warm bread, and a bed without fleas. I stared into the darkness, and every joint, every beam, every twitch of the shadow painted the same picture: a ship that wasn't one. A beast of iron, somewhere out there, with eyes that cut through the depths.

I tried to flush the rum from my veins, but it was like begging the devil for forgiveness—he hears you, but he laughs at you. The name I'd scribbled on the paper continued to burn in my mind. Nemo. I'd tucked it under the sail, as if you could hide a curse, but in truth, it sat on my chest like a stone. I felt it with every breath.

Around midnight, a noise jolted me awake. Not thunder, not rain, nothing natural. It was a dull roar, steady, like a heart beating far too large to belong to a human. I sat up, listened, and my mouth went dry. Conseil continued to snore, the poor bastard. I crawled to the door, pressed my ear to the wet wood. The roar was there. Close. And then—nothing. Cut off, as if someone had pulled the plug.

I dared to look out. The storm was merciless, water ran into my face, and my eyes burned. But for a fleeting moment, I thought I saw a silhouette: something dark and enormous, swimming beneath the surface. Not a ship, too deep, too smooth. Not an animal, too straightforward, too purposeful. It glided along as if watching us, not wanting to be noticed. Then it disappeared again.

My heart raced, my fingers trembled, and yet I had to grin. As if I'd seen something no one should have seen. An invitation to madness. "You bastard," I muttered, "you're really here." The sea only responded with foam, but I knew he'd heard me.

I retreated into the darkness and lay down next to Conseil, who was still lying in his crooked, drunken-candle position. My eyes remained open. The storm screamed, but I heard only the echo of its roar. A heart beating somewhere deep within. And I knew it wasn't a heart beating for us—but against us.

It wasn't until shortly before dawn that I drifted off, not into sleep, but into a kind of semi-consciousness in which dreams and reality mate and produce deformities. I saw the bar again, the one-eyed man, the dead sailor. I heard laughter, dry, malicious, and I knew it belonged to Nemo. He wasn't laughing because something was funny. He was laughing because he already had me in his sack.

And when I finally closed my eyes, I felt that the sea already knew my name.

The morning smelled of mold and cold tar. I woke up as if someone had just smashed a shovel across my head. Conseil was lying across the old sails, drooling, his eyes half-open, as if he'd just stopped halfway to the afterlife. My back ached, my head ached, and my throat was as dry as a preacher's after three hours of lying.

Outside, the storm had passed, but the world looked no better. Gray clouds, gray water, gray faces skulking around the harbor. Men dragged nets, women yelled at children, seagulls screeched as if they themselves had the hangover of their lives. Everything seemed like a sweating nightmare, except it wasn't.

I stepped outside, breathed in the salty air, but it tasted not of freedom, but of guilt. There it was again, that feeling that something was waiting for me. Not an adventure, as novels promise people, but a curse. The sea glittered deceptively, and I thought of the roar from last night, of the silhouette in the water. Nemo. Nobody. A name that now stuck in my teeth like a splinter.

Conseil came up behind me, yawning, hands in his pockets. "Let's get out of here," he muttered, "there's nothing here but trouble and broken livers." I nodded, but only to give him some peace. Deep down, I knew we were already in too deep. You don't get out once you've heard that name. You carry it like a disease.

The pub was still at the end of the quay, gloomy, leaning, as if it were about to topple into the sea. I could hear the voices from far away—laughter, shouting, the clinking of glasses. The same damned melody as every night. And yet, something was different today. As we pushed open the door, I felt it immediately: the stares. Every pair of eyes was glued to me, as if they knew I'd been speaking to the spirits outside.

The one-eyed man sat at the bar, grinning as always, only wider. A glass, half empty, was next to him, and he raised it to me as if making a toast: "So, have you seen him?" His voice cut through the noise, and for a moment the bar fell silent. I didn't answer. I couldn't. Perhaps silence was the only honest answer.

The men murmured, women whispered, and the barman placed a glass in front of me without comment, as if he knew I would need it. I drank deeply, burning, and the taste was different. Not rum, not schnapps—it tasted of salt. Of depth. Of metal. I choked, put the glass back, and stared into it.

“Welcome, stranger,” said the one-eyed man, “you belong here now.”

And at that moment I realized: Chapter One was over. The bar had swallowed me, the sea had marked me, and Nemo—that nobody—had long since begun writing my story.

A job that smells of trouble

The morning tasted of tin and bad coffee that no one had made. The harbor was awake, but only in the way a whipped dog is awake: gritted teeth, suspicious, ready to bite at the slightest false move. I hadn't slept well—which is to say, not at all—and my eyes felt as if they contained sand, not the good, warm beach stuff, but the sharp-edged stuff that lies in sacks next to coal and is always in the way. Conseil trotted beside me, with the expression of a man awaiting a verdict whose verdict he already knows. We had no plans, only a name in our heads, which had grown heavier during the night and now hung between us like a dented bell: Nemo.

The pub was still alive. It's always alive. Even if you set it on fire, something remains that keeps drinking. The landlord was already standing in the doorway, as if he'd been expecting us, his hands on a rag that never dried, and his face strangely clean for someone who must have dirt in his blood. He nodded to me, but not in a different way than usual. A nod that said: Not here, not loudly. Then his hand slid under the counter, and as I approached, there was suddenly a letter, sealed, the seal as greasy as the harbor film that floats on the water when someone somewhere pours oil into the gutter. My name was written on it, scrawled, hastily, as if someone had been afraid the ink would come to life.

"A messenger brought it," the innkeeper grumbled without blinking. "Early. No questions asked, no answers." He twisted the rag as if he could wring the world dry with it. "And listen: I've never seen you, you've never known me, and if anyone asks, you'll only drink water." He hammered home the last word with his gaze on me, and we both knew it was a lie as big as a whale.

I turned the letter over in my hands. The seal bore nothing delicate, no coat of arms, no decoration. Just a round imprint that looked like the mouth of a lamp that had stared at one point for too long. I pried it open. The smell hit me: damp files, tar, old fish, a wafer-thin whiff of banknotes that had changed hands too often. The text was brief, but not cheap. I was ordered to report immediately to the office of the shipowners' consortium, second flight of stairs on the right, a sign with a yellowed anchor. "In consultation with the Royal Navy," it read, "for the clarification of a matter of immediate commercial interest." And then: "Someone has recommended your name." No name, no name of who the someone was. Just this "recommended," which read like "at the mercy of."

"I thought so," Conseil said tonelessly. "If something smells like trouble, it's the city handing out invitations like crumbs." He bent over the letter, sniffing as if he could smell the lie. "Officer, huh? The kind of people the sea can only bear in watercolors, not on their boots."

I pocketed the letter. "If they're putting figures on the table, it's better to take them honestly than to have them take us crooked," I said. A phrase I've never heard before, but one that's become standard fare in cities like these. The barman snorted, a sound that was equal parts scorn and concern, then turned away and pretended to wash glasses. The glasses laughed at him.

The path to the office led past the office buildings, those brick boxes with the faces of old bookkeepers: austere, damp, pale. Curtains that had seen too many winters hung behind the panes like tired tongues. Somewhere a stove

whistled pitifully, and in the gutters on the steps lay rain so gray it looked more at home on paper than in the sea. We climbed a narrow staircase, wood that gives way when you walk over it, as if it were glad for every extra weight it can feel one more time before it breaks.

The sign with the yellowed anchor found us before we found it. The door was open a crack; inside, it smelled of ink, oil, and the cold breath of men who love numbers because numbers don't stare at them. Nautical charts hung in the hallway, and I stopped. So many pins were stuck in them, red and black, some with short ribbons, labeling places I knew well and others that were just stories. The pins were like knives stuck in flesh, only here the flesh was routes, currents, profit lines, lifelines threatening to burst.

"Hurry," growled a voice from one of the rooms, without seeing who we were. The kind of voice that doesn't ask who's knocking, assuming everyone has to come in anyway. We pushed in, and there they sat: a Consortium man with hands so soft that even ink didn't stain them, and an officer whose uniform was the opposite of soft, stiff and angry, with coffee stains that looked like small fortresses. On the table were lists, diagrams, two compasses—one open, one closed—and a small, shallow box of sealing wax. The sun, which didn't make it here, was replaced by a crooked lamp that whirred.

"Sir..." began the man with the soft hands, and I saw his eyes briefly search to see if he had my name right. I didn't help him. He smiled without moving his mouth. "You know why you're here." That wasn't a sentence that demanded an answer. It was a chess move that prepared the next leap. "Ships are disappearing. Not just the cheap ones. Good ships. Insurers are biting their own books. The Navy is biting its tongue. We all... bite." His gaze slid to the officer who acted as if he had no neck, only an order that resided there.

"The things happening out there are unpleasant," the officer added, and "unpleasant" was the hardest word he could muster. "We're setting up a special unit. Name, equipment, mandate—everything is in flux. We need eyes that see more than water. And a head that doesn't immediately throw up when things get deeper."

"You mean: a fig leaf," I said, not politely. "A man to blame later, if the monster was just a mirror."

The soft hand clapped softly on the edge of the table, as if soothing a growing dog. "We mean: expertise," the man crooned. "You know currents. You know wrecks. You know what stays in the sea and what resurfaces. And—" here

came a barely audible catch—"they say you have a knack for believing the right thing when everyone else is still praying."

"People say a lot," Conseil murmured behind me, sounding more dangerous than he meant it. The officer sized him up with a look as if he wanted to strike him off the record.

I went to the window that wasn't one; it was a dim pane that let through only the light, not the truth. But beyond it, diagonally across the rooftops, I could see the quay we had come up, and something beyond the cranes caught my attention. A frigate I may have already known, but now it looked different. Its back was studded with racks that looked like half-formed ideas: makeshift searchlights, still bearing the workshop label; crates that promised harpoons even though they were called "tools"; rails on which something rough, long, and dangerous could be moved quickly. Men moved like ants raiding a pantry.

"Our platform," the officer said, as if he'd counted my glances. "Temporary. But sufficient to... force answers."

"You can't interrogate the sea," I said. "It answers by eating or spitting."

"Then let's hope she vomits," the consortium man replied mildly, and I thought he'd rather be the one digesting. "The conditions," he continued, and now he really smiled, "are appropriate to the situation." He pushed across a piece of paper that smelled like everything here: of wet wall and slippery greed. Advance, a tidy sum that reminded me of better days. Forgiveness of my old debts that lay like seaweed around my ankles. A cabin on board, "privileged access" to the maps. And a paragraph stating that the captain—not me, someone else—demands absolute discipline. No questions unless questions are provided for.

"The sea sets the rules," I said, without taking my eyes off the line. "And who is this captain?"

The officer raised his head, as if trying to remember the name. "The name is irrelevant," he growled. "He's doing what he's ordered to do."

I laughed quietly. "That's what everyone says who knows that names have power." I wasn't thinking, I was speaking. And what I was thinking was: If you don't say the name, someone else will fill it. The sea loves emptiness. It fills it with us.

"You have leeway on deck as long as you deliver results," the money man continued as if nothing had been said. "Your servant—" he nodded toward Conseil, "—is registered. He remains your responsibility. We need you at the quay by noon at the latest. Today." The last two letters snapped shut like a knife.

Conseil made that sound I recognized: a dry intake of breath, just before protest. I raised my hand. "What happens if the monster isn't a monster?" I asked. "If it's a... work? A will? Something that mirrors ours, only deeper, heavier, angrier?"

The officer responded with a twitch in his cheek, perhaps a hint of humor. "Then we are armed against both. Flesh or iron, will or mishap. We strike, we bind, we salvage—or we sink."

The consortium paper was heavy. I picked up the pen, felt it hesitate, as if pens had morals. My hand didn't tremble. Not because I was brave. Because I knew that some paths close if you stand in the doorway too long. I signed, and the ink congealed for a heartbeat, as if it were trying to curdle, then flowed. I wrote my name, and in my head I heard another, laughing soundlessly.

"Very good," the man breathed, and now his hands were no longer soft, but simply hands. He pressed a flat envelope into my fingers—an advance that reeked of guilt—and a small brass plate stamped with the letter F. "Access to the frigate's quay. Don't lose it. It's hard to find replacements." The officer slid a list to me: things I wasn't allowed to bring on board (anything fun) and things I had to bring with me (anything heavy). Beneath the list was a single sentence: "Measures in case of unforeseen events will be explained on board." He shone a light on me, even though the lamp didn't brighten up.

We stepped back into the hallway. The charts were silent, as if they'd just been through a funeral. I stroked a route I'd once traveled and noticed the needle wasn't moving. Needles never move. Only we do. "You know this isn't an assignment," Conseil said, quietly so the charts wouldn't hear. "It's an invitation to close the door once you're inside."

"I know," I said. "And it's no better outside." We went down the steps, each one creaking as if commenting on our fate. Down in the alley stood the one-eyed man, like a crow's head that's learned to smoke. He hadn't followed us. He was simply where he was most feared.

"Nice stamps up there," he croaked, pointing at my bag with his chin as if he could see through leather. "Stamps don't stop the sea. They just make the papers heavier as they sink." He took a half step closer, his breath smelling of dock and disease. "Have you already forgotten the name?"

“What name?” I asked, and that was the most honest lie I have ever uttered.

He grinned, his empty eye sparkling brighter than his good one. "The one who wakes you when everyone else is asleep. The one who doesn't fit in ink." He nodded toward the quay where the frigate stood, pretending it was a solution. "He's waiting out there, and he loves it when men sign their names to things."

“Do you have any advice?” asked Conseil, and I heard how little he expected from it.

"Drink water," said the one-eyed man, laughing hoarsely at his own joke. "And when you pray, don't pray for mercy. Pray for clear eyes. The depths show you what you are. To some, they show too much."

He disappeared as such men disappear: not around a corner, but out of the necessity of the moment. We moved on, and with every step the frigate grew larger. The makeshift searchlights stood on deck like giraffe necks, and a sailor in shirtsleeves polished a lens as if it were an altar. Boxes were carried over, on which numbers were written in chalk, which no one pronounced. A whistle cut through the air, and somewhere metal clanged, a sober, cold click that made my teeth ache.

I stopped, just for a breath, and looked over the side of the ship. The water next to the quay was darker than dark, and a thin, iridescent film floated on the surface, moving as if it had a mind of its own. A payroll clerk's compass on the dock wobbled as if he were getting hiccups. I had to smile. Everything was ready. For what, no one knew. But the sea always knows first.

"Noon," Conseil reminded us, his voice like that of a clock that can't be pushed aside. "We're early. Time for one last decent coffee. Or one last stupid thing."

"Coffee's out," I said. "We've had enough of this stupid stuff." I turned the brass plate in my pocket between my fingers until it warmed up. Then we pushed our hands deeper into the openings of our coats, as if we could hold on to something that had already been decided long ago.

The city behind us continued to scratch at the sky. In front of us stood wood, wanting more than wood wants. Between the two lay what makes men sign

their names to other people's plans: money, fear, curiosity. I had just enough of everything to keep me from turning back. And when a bell rang on the quayside—maybe the wrong one, maybe the right one—I knew this day wouldn't wait for us. He wanted us to walk. And I, idiot, liked to walk.

Before we'd even gotten down the stairs, the officer called us back. Not a voice, just a hook. It grabbed the back of the neck and pulled as if it had its own weight. We turned around, Conseil growled softly, and I thought: That's what doors sound like when they still hide a story. Inside, the light hadn't gotten brighter, just more concentrated, as if the lamp had decided to squeeze out the truth like a pimple.

"A few details," said the man with the soft hands, and the word "details" was so smooth it almost slipped off the table. He pushed a folder over, brown leather, opened too often, the edges like teeth. Inside lay paper that had soaked up the city's humidity. The first few pages were lists. Names, ship sizes, routes, positions that were only estimated because no one was left to be more precise. Next to them were numbers that made insurers wake up in the night wondering if God was actually an accountant.

"You see the pattern?" he asked. His finger, a pale larva, tapped three dots that lay on the map like freckles—innocent until you connect them. "Streamline here, supply line there, and in between..." He made a gesture that described a maw. "...a hole. Not one that's on the map. One that eats ships."

The officer placed a wooden box next to the folder that looked as if it had spent its entire life waiting in damp cupboards. He opened it. Inside were pieces of metal, neatly laid out on velvet. Fragments. One round, as if something had drilled through something else, so precisely it gave me chills; one jagged, as if someone had teased metal with a watchmaker's patience until it gave way. "Keels," said the officer, "and frames, salvaged from a wreck that was less than two days old when we found it. No harpoon. No storm. No ram like anyone knows. This..." He lifted the round piece, turned it in the lamplight, and the gleam was not that of prey, but that of surgical instruments. "...is an angle of entry that doesn't lie."

"A knife," I said, "that isn't a knife." My voice sounded as if I were standing farther away than the space allowed. Conseil stood at the back, arms crossed, his forehead the slave of a thought that wouldn't sleep.

"There's talk," said the man with the money, and "talk" was his word for anything that bothered him because you can't sue for it. "A steel beast. A devil.

A new weapon. A bet of the future against the present. We pay for certainty." He smiled—I didn't even notice he'd stopped. "Certainty is a luxury we have to afford."

"And what if the certainty doesn't like us?" I asked. "What if it spits on us?"

The officer shoved the pieces back into the box as if closing a coffin. "Then she'll spit us out on deck, or not at all. In either case, we'll take a record." He slid a second envelope toward me. Thin. "Appendix to the contract. Confidential instructions. Open on board. You know the drill." I knew the drill. It was the kind of paper that tells you what to do when the world stops being polite.

"There's one more condition," the Consortium man began, and I felt the air in the room rise. "Public benefit. Private control. If it—whatever it is—proves to be a work that not only destroys, but does..." He searched for a word that didn't sound stupid and eventually gave up. "...then dealing with it is the Consortium's responsibility, under the supervision of the Crown. Not the responsibility of any one individual. No heroes. No madmen. No captains who suddenly think they're bigger than the sea."

That was the moment when the name we were all thinking of flew across the room like a cold bird—without a sound, but with a shadow. Nemo. No one. The officer pretended to pull on an invisible collar. "We don't care if there's a name on it," he growled. "Those who operate outside the law will be brought back within it. Dead, if necessary."

"Or hired," Conseil murmured, so quietly that only I heard. He was right. The world loves desperados as long as it can put another shirt on them.

I leaned over the map, smelling ink, damp wood, the oily breath of machines that didn't yet exist and yet were already running in our heads. The red needles marked the places where the sea had devoured men. I wondered if the sea ever had its fill. I wondered if it ever had.

"Why me?" I finally asked. "There are better scholars. Drier ones. More obedient ones."

The man with the money was no longer smiling. His eyes became two neat, small mouths. "Because you can believe and doubt without praying. And because you have debts. Debt keeps men in their place. Scholars without debt flee when things get serious."

He was right, and I hated him for it. Debts are leashes. You pull until you bleed, and then you're suddenly grateful that you at least have a leash to hang on to instead of drifting. I pocketed the folder, and the officer took note of it like the weather: useful, but non-negotiable.

"One more thing," he said, his tone shifting to a register that sounded cold. "Rumors are circulating that certain elements in the harbor..." He let the sentence hang and looked toward the door as if the sea were sitting there. "...had prior contact. Men who were visited. Letters without returns. Lights on the water that aren't lanterns. Should you—by chance—come across such rumors, you will report it. Not out of curiosity. Out of discipline."

"Rumors are the only thing that arrives on time in this city," I said. "I report what has a body. I drink the rest."

He nodded as if I'd said "Yes, sir." Some people don't care what you say, as long as you point your head in the right direction. He picked up his compass, the one open, and tapped the edge. The needle trembled, even though the table was quiet. "There are nights," he murmured, "when the thing goes crazy, even on land." He closed it, as if that solved the problem.

"Your reputation precedes you," the corporate man added, again gently. "They say you have the ability to ask the right questions about wrecks. Not the ones that have answers, but the ones worth enlivening." His words were an opera for bankers. "We need that."

"You need an apology if things go wrong," I said, and he nodded as if I'd given him a flower. Honesty is a curiosity in such spaces; it's put on a shelf and gathered dust.

They let us go, this time for real. The stairs took us in again, as if we were too heavy, and downstairs, the hallway smelled again of cold stoves and antediluvian etiquette. But before we'd even left the hallway, a sound stopped me: the thin, clinking sound of a light fixture being turned up higher to sharpen the shadow. It was a secretary stepping out of a shadow, so inconspicuous that she immediately seemed guilty. She was young, but not naive; her eyes calculated before they understood.

"You should know," she said, without whispering and without courage, "that men who took down names on the quay this morning were no longer in their beds that evening." Her hands held papers, as if paper were a weapon. "You don't talk about it out loud. But the women know. The ones who have to wait."

"And the gentlemen don't know?" I asked. It sounded harsher than I intended.

"The gentlemen," she said, and the word cut through, "know everything in their books." She made a small gesture with her chin toward the folder on my chest. "Be careful with your questions. Some answers come with wet boots."

I nodded. She disappeared again into the logic of the house, where people only exist when they're needed. Outside, the alley breathed, as if we'd been underwater for too long. Conseil kicked the door open, as if that were a way to start the day anew. "You should have asked her to come with us," he muttered, grimly and lasciviously, the poor woman's sense of humor. I snorted. "She'll come with us," I said, "but not where we'd like. She'll come into our heads."

We left. The one-eyed man was no longer there. That was worse than seeing him. Men like him are like toothaches: darlings of paranoia, and when they remain silent, things get serious. At the quayside, the frigate made a sound that couldn't have been made of wood. A slide, a heel, a click. I knew sounds, and this one knew me. It sounded like temptation disguised as duty.

We stopped at a stand that promised coffee and sold absolution. The coffee was black and offensive, but it kept our hands warm. "Tell me one thing," said Conseil, holding the cup to his lips like a cigarette, "what do you think? Animal or machine?"

"Hungry," I said. "The shape is a matter of taste." I took a sip and forgot how to swallow. "What do you think?"

He spat in the gutter as if marking territory. "I believe in men who want more than they're entitled to. I believe in merchants who think they can bribe the sea. I believe in officers who like to command because no one has taught them how to ask. And I believe in us idiots who stand in between and pretend we aren't hungry too."

I laughed, and it felt good, like a coughing fit that releases something. "We're not better," I said. "We're just more honest about what we need." I rummaged in my pocket, felt the brass plate, cold as a dentist's instrument. "And what if it's a machine? What if there's someone down there who's fed up with the world, as fed up as we are, only with better tools?"

Conseil looked at the water, which lay like a closed curtain. "Then he'll show us who we are. Or we'll show him." He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe both."

A boy ran by, thin as a note, shouting something about a summons to the guardhouse for anyone wanting to board today. We answered the call, and there they were: lists, clipboards, men spelling out names as if they were diseases. A policeman with a mustache that carried more authority than its wearer asked our purpose. "Hunting," I said crisply. He nodded, wrote, his pencil scratching like a rat on masonry. "Behavior," he said then, and that wasn't advice, but a wish he knew wouldn't come true.

A man next to us—narrow shoulders, broad courage—lifted his shirt to reveal a scar along his ribs. Thin, clean, the skin around it smooth as if polished. "No knife can do that," he said, and his voice sounded as if fighting the urge to scream. "I'll pay it back. With interest."

"The sea doesn't take interest," I said. "The sea takes all or nothing." He looked at me as if I'd pawned his faith, snorted, and walked away. I knew that look. It says: If you're right, I hate you. If you're wrong, I hate you twice as much.

The midday bell cast its sound across the water, and I felt the day donning a new mask. Above, somewhere between the crane and the mast, seagulls screeched. Not funny. More like old laughter that has forgotten what it was about. I turned the envelope containing the "instructions" in my pocket. It was there. It weighed. And yet it seemed lighter than the word no one spoke. Light flickered behind my eyes again—a cold thread, taut like a thought pulling beneath the surface.

"One more question before we board," Conseil said, and his tone was different, softer, as if he were thinking about something like the future for the first time today. "If he exists... if he's a man... would you talk to him before you hunt him down?"

I didn't need a second thought. "If he talks," I said, "I'll talk back. But I don't think talking is his favorite sport." I looked at the water. "His favorite sport is showing us how small we are."

"Then we're due," said Conseil. "We're very small."

We continued walking along the quay wall, the planks beneath our boots saying "too late" in the language of old nails. I thought of the secretary, the list of those who hadn't come home, the officer who closed the compass as if he were closing the world, and the man with the money, whose hands were softer than any rope. But above all, I thought of the round wound in the metal—

clean, clinical, without anger—and I realized that some violence looks more polite than the person who fears it.

At the foot of the gangway stood two sailors with faces like quarries. One was checking tiles, the other was checking glances. I showed the F. It gleamed briefly, as if it knew that brilliance was the only thing one could afford here. "Aboard," said the look of one. "Pull yourself together," said the other. We didn't think either was particularly original, but we obeyed. Not up yet—not here, not in this block—but close enough that the wood beneath us was no longer quite dry land.

Behind us lay the city that knew nothing but hunger. In front of us lay the ship, pretending it was an answer. In between I stood, with debt in my pocket, a name in my head, and a sea that had long known us both. I heard that roar again, perhaps imaginary, perhaps wind in the belly of the world. Steady. Patient. As if there were someone down there who never tires. I raised my head, inhaled the smell—tar, salt, metal, the breath of the future—and I knew that if we were lucky, we'd be dead. If not, things would get more complicated.

"Time," said Conseil. "Yes," I said. "Time." And somewhere, deep somewhere, something laughed, so quietly it sounded almost friendly.

The yard behind the office was a slaughterhouse for things that don't bleed. Crates ripped open, ropes knotted as if a drunken god had tried to learn macramé. Behind the wall, where someone had scratched "Save us, you thief" into wet bricks, stacks of barrels, harpoon handles, iron shackles, and lamp glasses were stacked. A smell of tar, cold metal, and the sweet breath of old barrels hung in the air, and somewhere a violin squawked from an open window—someone practicing the same wrong motif for the hundredth time. The sounds were caught on the rain, which hung in the air only as a damp veil, as if the city had forgotten how to dry itself.

"Do you hear that?" asked Conseil, jerking his chin to the left. It wasn't a sound, more a jerk of attention. Voices, laughter, that curt yelling of men who marvel at the abilities of others as long as they don't question their own. We rounded a row of crates from which straw oozed like yellow entrails, and there was the stage: a painted barrel in the middle of the yard, whitewashed, with a crudely painted eye peering over the curvature. Around it were a handful of sailors and dockworkers, lined up like crows when there's carrion somewhere. One held a piece of chalk, drawing lines on the ground, measured steps, waving his hand, explaining. A bet was in the air, heavy as a weather front.

"What's there to see?" someone shouted, and received a reply from three voices: "Ned! Ned Land, you bastard! Show them!"

He stood with his back to us, as big as a cupboard the glaziers had forgotten to put doors on. Shoulders like the cross-sections of two beams, his neck a thing of sinew that a knife would fall in love with if it had the courage. His hair was dark and looked as if it had been washed with seawater and curses. He held a harpoon, and no part of this man looked more at home than the hand on the shaft. I saw his fingers move over the wood as if they were stroking an animal he knew and that knew him. No haste. No posturing. This was the most dangerous kind of security: the one that doesn't want to prove itself.

"That's that clown?" whispered Conseil, more defiant than curious. I shrugged. "If he's a clown, it's the one with the knife."

The men were noisy, giving advice they thought was a joke. One shouted at him to "hit the eye, you peacock," another: "Bet you can't even hit the damn barrel." Ned turned his head, not all the way, just enough to reveal a profile. His face wore the kind of calm that comes from seeing how things end too many times. A pale mark on his cheek—an old scar, not from a knife, more from metal that had run out of patience. He spat to the side, not as a gesture, just because his mouth didn't interest him.

"Hush," he said, and his voice was strangely soft, as if it were made of fur. "If you open your mouths, you'll lose the bet." A few laughed, a few blushed. He took three steps back, rested the harpoon on his forearm as if it were a girl being led to a dance, and then time held its breath. He raised his arm, not much. No aiming, as one depicts in books. Just a flow of weight forward, from hip and shoulder and wrist, and the harpoon was gone. No whirring drama, just a brief, evil chant, and then the iron was stuck right in the eye of the barrel, as if it had belonged there since the paint dried. The wood creaked. The yard went "Hah!", the men went "Oho!", and someone called out to God, though he rarely appeared here.

"Damn," Conseil said without anger. "That's a real hit."

Ned didn't go to look. He knew where his iron was, like a dog knows where it's buried its bones. Instead, he slowly turned toward the men, raised his hand, and the chalk came flying. He caught it out of the air and drew a new line, ten feet back. One whistled. One protested. "Now!"

"Only now," Ned corrected, and his eyes fell on me as if the movement of my breath had betrayed him. Just a moment. A brief, casual glance that said: You're not a docker. You smell too much of question marks. Then the look continued, as if he'd already taken stock of me. I barely liked him and immediately respected him. Disgusting combination.

"Another bet," shouted a sailor, his teeth a map of deprivation. "A case of rum if you hit twice. With one hand behind your back!" Laughter. Rum was the smallest religion in this city, but the most faithful. Ned smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "A case of rum," he said. "And you carry it on board yourselves. I want to see your backs pray."

He tucked his left hand behind his back, raised his right, described a weary semicircle with the harpoon—and threw. The iron flew as if it had no time for drama. It landed next to the first harpoon, so close that the shafts touched, as if they were brothers, separated too soon and now stealing a second of tenderness. The barrel made a noise as if it were about to boil. The crowd burst briefly at the seams, and somewhere someone fell, lifted from their stasis by joy. "Holy..." someone said. The end of the sentence was drowned out by cheers.

"That's going to be expensive," I grumbled, and Conseil nodded. "Expensive and necessary."

I stepped closer, but not too close. I know how men react when you shake hands too soon: They bite. "Ned Land," I said, sounding like I was introducing a hammer. "They say you only shake hands with someone who spits in your face and stops."

He looked at me, and in his eyes, which were more dark than brown, there was no patience, but also no drama. "It means a lot. Who are you?"

I said my name, the real one, not the one the bars gave me, and he repeated it as if testing whether it would fit between his teeth. "Scholar," he said, not as a question. "Or someone who pretends until the sea weans him out."

"Scholar who doesn't like to stay on dry paper," I said. "We'll be on board. The frigate. I'll... observe what the sea hides. You hunt what it eats."

A twitching grin. "I hunt what can be hunted. And if it can't be hunted, I kill it until it says otherwise." He went to the barrel, ripped out the harpoons one by

one without choking, and the wood came out to meet him like a confession. "The sea doesn't like talkers. It likes hands."

"We have hands," Conseil chimed in, "and questions. Questions that can't be bottled up." He spoke calmly, politely, but his tone had the blunt saw that cuts through patience.

Ned looked at him, smiled differently, warmer. "The servant, eh?" He looked back at me. "He holds you if you slip. Good. Many fall because no one tells them which way is up."

"Ober is where the rum comes from," Conseil retorted. A few of the men chuckled. Ned curled his lip. "Ober is where you can breathe without counting."

The barrel was rolled away, the chalk wiped from the world with a wet rag. Someone came with a cartload of revenge—crate after crate, marked "land" with chalk, as if they were conquests. One of the sailors pretended to lift the crate, then called two more, and finally they pushed it like a coffin. I watched, feeling the old apprehension I get when men carry something they'll then drink: It always looks like their own future.

"So you're coming with me," Ned said, and it wasn't a question, just a statement read from the folds of my debt. "What's your role? Write it down when things go wrong? Or read it when things get worse?"

"I look into the holes," I said, "and describe what they've swallowed. Sometimes I find something worthwhile. Mostly just silence."

"Silence is rarely worth it," he grumbled. "But it's cleaner than the shouting of officers." He nodded toward the harbor, where the frigate was panting like an animal trying to wake it. "Their noise only lasts as long as the world listens. The depths don't listen."

"You talk like you knew her," I said. Ned looked over me, past me, through the houses, through the rain, into a memory that was too big for him. "I tried," he said. "I threw harpoons overboard at something that had no flesh. I hit, and the train was different. No flinching, no blood. Just power. Like trying to stop a train passing beneath you. You feel it. You feel it knows you." He snorted. "I hated it. And I want it again."

"Let's repeat: expensive and necessary," Conseil murmured. Ned heard, but pretended not to. A man who doesn't hide his obsession at least won't be surprised when it consumes him.

"Conditions?" I asked, before the court devoured the scene. "I saw your hand. And the iron that does what you want. What do you want from us?" I meant: from the crew, from the contract, from life. He meant: rum, loot, the right to do what he can.

"Free rein," he said without hesitation. "When it comes down to it, later people talk nonsense. I throw when I want to. I draw when I want to. No quack with rank tells me when to breathe. And a share. Not the charity given to heroes in songs. A slice of the cake, not just the crumbs." He looked me straight at me, and that was the first time I understood why men follow him: because his gaze doesn't promise you that you'll live—but that your death won't be meaningless.

"The officer has different ideas," I replied. "He thinks in protocols. He pays in permits."

"Then he can eat his dues," Ned said calmly. "I'll bring him loot in return. The kind of loot you can't sing about because it's made of metal. And I want my share. In rum, if necessary. In money, if possible. In peace, if absolutely necessary." The men behind him nodded as if he had recited the common law of the deep.

"You'll get both if you deliver," said a voice I too quickly attributed to the officer—but it was just one of the payboys, puffed up in my imagination. I laughed at myself. That's what happens when you leave too many rooms with men and lists: you can still hear the bureaucracy in the wind.

"We're not friends," said Ned, dipping the harpoon into a narrow barrel of oil as if christening it. "But we're on the same ship. That's enough. Friendship is for people who want to die on dry land."

"Enemies are easier," Conseil said, and this time Ned really smiled. "Enemies are honest when they grab your gut." He patted the shaft dry, ran his thumb over a notch. I realized that every notch was a story. Not every one of them was an animal.

The crowd dispersed. Bets were called, with laughter and a hint of aggression, as is only natural when men lose money that never belonged to them. Someone threw the painted barrel back into the shadows. The eye on it stared at me for the last time before it disappeared, and I felt like I was being watched by something that wasn't even real. Welcome to the harbor.

"One more thing," said Ned, as the three of us stood a little way away, where the noise sounded like rain in an old pan. "When you ask your questions out there—do it quickly. Things stared at for too long get nervous." He nodded toward the water. "And when you meet him—the one whispering to your pillow—don't ask him names. Names are snares. He'll give you one that doesn't fit, just to see if you'll wear it."

"He already has one," I said, my tongue suddenly heavy. "No one."

Ned nodded like someone accepting a bad joke, suspecting the teller would otherwise remain silent. "Fits men who hate more than they love." He glanced at the searchlights on the frigate, which weren't yet lit, yet acted as if they were merely waiting for darkness. "No one. That's what they call those who've been underwater too long."

We parted ways, not because we wanted to, but because the farm, the work, the men, the daylight drove us apart again, like waves of debris. Ned disappeared toward the crane, two crates on his shoulders, as if gravity were helping him. Conseil watched him go with that mixture of skepticism and grudgingly acknowledged respect he usually reserved for doctors and card magicians.

"He'll either kill you or save you," he finally said. "Maybe both on the same day."

"I'll take the order he offers," I said, and as I spoke, I felt the future place a finger on my sternum. I pulled the envelope containing the confidential instructions halfway out of my pocket, only to shove it back. Too much paper for a farm where the truth smells of oil.

On the way back to the quay wall, we stepped over a rope that lay across like a sleeping snake. A boy stumbled, caught himself, laughed, and pretended it was intentional. The seagulls screamed, because seagulls always scream when men think. And outside, beyond the planks, where the water was darker than anything that can color a city, I thought—no, I swore—I saw a long, cold thread of light. Just a moment. A greeting or a threat, hard to say. I blinked. Gone.

“Did you—” Conseil began.

"I know," I said. "Call me crazy, but I know."

"I don't think you're crazy," he murmured. "I think you're curious. That's worse."

We stood at the gangplank where the tokens were checked, where names moved across lists as if they were fish in a net. The man with the pencil was new, or I hadn't seen him before. His earlobe had a notch, as if a hook had once loved him. "Names," he said. I gave them. He wrote. The world was small again, countable, orderly. And beneath it, thin as the smell of metal in the air, the disorderly pushed its way. Ned Land laughed somewhere behind us, short, like a cough. The yard answered with a dull knock, as if a lid were falling on a box. Perhaps there was rum in the box. Perhaps the future was in the box.

"Come on," said Conseil, pulling his coat tighter. "Before someone gets the idea to ask us if we know what we're doing."

"No one ever knows," I said. "Least of all the people who ask." I ran my thumb over the brass plate in my pocket. It felt as if it had a pulse. And somewhere, beneath all the noise, there was that thrumming again—or I just remembered it. Steady. Patient. A heart that beats not to live, but to wait.

Ned Land had set his terms. The city had its own. The sea had none. It pulled us forward, politely like a bat with gloves. We placed our feet on the edge of everything we knew and acted as if it were just another step. As always happens when you start chasing something that has already decided it has you.

The quay looked as if someone had decided to dump the contents of an entire warship on the city and wait to see if any of it would climb back aboard on its own. Crates as big as coffins, just as suitable. Barrel upon barrel, hope labeled in white chalk: lamp oil, fuses, spare lenses, bolts, rope, rum. The searchlight frames jutted from the deck like giraffes' necks that forgot they have no heads. Two stokers carried a crate of "Caution - Lenses" as if holding the coffin of a saint. One slipped on the wet wood, the crate tipped, recovered, his curse was long and elaborate and would have replaced incense in any church.

The air smelled of tar, sweat, and the sweet breath of barrels that had seen more stories than priests. A hint of metal hung over everything, not the honest iron of chains, but that fine, cold aroma that comes from purposefully built machines. It settled in the throat and turned the water on the tongue into tin.

The frigate puffed, still moored at the quay, yet acted as if it were already out. On the aft deck, they were testing the searchlights. One sailor cranked the light, a second held the reflector with gloves as if it were a hot moon. The beam of light moved across the wet planks, brushed against faces, lingered briefly on mine, and I had the dubious pleasure of seeing myself the color of a fish that no longer knows whether it's floating or hanging. Then the beam bounced on,

danced over the masts of the neighboring boats, cut through the fog, lost itself, found its way back, clicked off. That clicking. It crept into your molars, made them nervous, as if they'd been in trouble.

A payroll clerk with the expression of a man who only lives if one column is correct stood at a rickety table writing. Names, sizes, wages, debts, deductions. His pencil was so short he looked like he was holding a bad decision. I put my name under a list where mine was already, as if someone had bet on me. The guy checked one box, took the next, checked another, and I thought, if there's order in hell, then it accepts receipts.

"The lamps will go out when the rain lets up," a boatswain grumbled past me, his voice as rough as the hand that tossed me a bundle. "Personal allocation: two oil rags, one knife, three fuses, one lens. Do not swap, do not lose, do not eat. Whoever swaps something loses teeth. Whoever loses something loses blood. Whoever eats, eats on deck." I weighed the knife in my hand. Not beautiful, not proud. But in the steel lay that will that only things have that know they'll be used more often than they're cleaned.

Conseil stood with a stack of bandages by a stack of crates, as if he'd just robbed a pharmacy. His gaze darted back and forth between the ship and the water, as if trying to figure out which was more likely to kill him. "I have more bandages than shirts," he said without looking up. "That's a good sign for you and a bad sign for the rest."

I wanted to say something witty, but my mouth had other plans in moments like these. So I remained silent and instead looked down at the water at the quay. A thin, iridescent film lay upon it, dancing in colors that had nothing to do with the sky. Blue, green, violet—this wasn't elegantly spilled lamp oil. It was as if the sea itself had grown a skin. The film slid against the pilings, tore, and then reformed, as if it had learned to breathe. I smelled it and knew that you can get used to such smells if you spend enough years in the harbor. And that getting used to them is wrong.

"The compass is acting up," said one of the young sailors, waving the thing as if that were a way to shake things up. The needle took little hysterical fidgeting steps, found north, lost it, pointed at the pile of coal, then at the sky, then at the boy's shoe as if it were magnetic. An older sea dog took the device, tapped it as if it were a naughty rat being coaxed out of the wall, and handed it back without a word. "Learn the stars," he grumbled. "They lie more slowly."

The one-eyed man appeared where he didn't belong: right next to the payman, suddenly, as if he'd stepped out of the wooden box in which someone had just been searching for bolts. His scent announced him before his smile could. "Have you heard the new noise?" he asked the crowd, not to a single person, and those who knew him pretended not to. That's the courtesy you extend to fortune tellers when you don't want to pay them.

“What’s all the noise?” growled the boatswain, because he had to growl, otherwise the crew would forget who was growling and start doing it themselves.

"The heart below the waterline," said the one-eyed man, patting the pole as if it were made of flesh. "Knocks quietly, knocks evenly, knocks like shift work. A heart that never tires. It's nice when someone out there still thinks of us."

"Get lost," said the payroll clerk without looking up. "You're shifting my numbers."

"Numbers are the only thing that doesn't shift unless you let them," the one-eyed man crooned, grinning. Then he took a piece of chalk from his pocket and drew a circle on the planks. Not big, not important. Inside the circle, he drew three lines like a crude triskelion. "Three boats this week," he murmured. "One without bodies, one without a keel, one without a story. I wonder which one we'd prefer."

I wanted to kick the chalk out of his hand. Instead, I stood there, staring into that ridiculous circle, as if it could tell me something the cards in the office couldn't. Conseil placed his hand on my elbow, lightly but firmly. "If you listen to that, you'll soon be listening to the seagulls," he said. "And then you'll be feeding them your brain."

At the other end of the quay, a now familiar ceremony was underway: the men with the lists were calling out names, and the men with the shoulders were carrying crates. A line of crooked volunteers stood by the guardhouse. Some with that crooked dignity that men have when they volunteer somewhere for the first time in their lives. Some with faces that said: The fact that you're writing down our names is the best joke in this city. One coughed blood onto the ground, wiped it away with the back of his hand as if it were spilled coffee, and raised his arm when he heard his name called. The policeman with the mustache ticked the names off like weeds.

The officer walked with the stride of a man who's learned that voices carry more weight when you run ahead of them. His compass tinkled on a chain, bouncing against his chest, and I bet he didn't feel how it sometimes trembled. He gave orders no one liked and paused the kind of times officers do when they want to check if the air is theirs. Behind him, someone carried a box with brass buttons so carefully that I was almost convinced it contained a new language.

"Test the searchlights around the third bell," he said, more to the quay than to us. "In fog, pan slowly, don't look blindly into your own lenses, you monkeys. The paymaster counts the ammunition. If you count wrong, you count double. And stop smoking on the quay. God likes it warm, but not here."

Nobody threw away their cigarette.

Ned Land climbed the gangplank at the other end, two crates on his shoulder, a third by the handle in his left hand, as if the things were made of crumpled paper. His head was slightly tilted forward, that "from the back" walk of men who know the meaning of weight. He called out to no one, laughed at no one, let no one stop him. He disappeared onto the deck, and for a moment I thought the boards breathed a sigh of relief.

"The knife's in a good position," said the boatswain beside me, without looking at me. "You have hands that understand the weight. That won't help against drowning, but it will help with carrying." He pointed his chin at the water. "Today it's calm. Calm is a trick. Tomorrow it'll push the planks out from under your feet."

I pulled the confidential instructions from my pocket, not to read them, just to make sure they were still there. The envelope was as thin as an excuse. I put it back as if someone had caught me stealing. The one-eyed man watched me and nodded as if he knew exactly what was inside. "If you open it, you'll understand less," he said. "Papers are how men lie to the ocean. It doesn't read. It eats."

"And you?" I asked, suddenly tired of prophets with fuse breath. "What do you eat?"

"Names," he said too quickly. "And teeth. Names first, teeth later." He laughed, coughed, and the cough spat something onto the planks that looked like shame.

It began to drizzle lightly again, the kind of damp, offended rain that deliberately falls next to the barrels. The headlights did a test run: a slow sweep over the side of the boat, the lenses trembled briefly, settled, and a beam skimmed just above the water's surface. I couldn't see anything, and yet I thought the beam encountered resistance somewhere. Not hard, not visible. More like gliding over a cold hand. The light wobbled almost imperceptibly, then went out. One technician shouted that it was just the dynamo, another shouted that the dynamo was offended to be called "just."

A boy who looked like a punctuation mark bumped my ankle with a cart, stopped, and opened his eyes wide, eyes as blue as the sea likes to claim. "Sorry, sir," he said, grinning with only half a mouth. "I don't need that foot, but it's good to have it still here." On his cart lay harpoon tips wrapped in cloth. One end had slipped, and a bit of metal flashed. Not the rough steel I expected. Something smoother, harder, that didn't glint in the light, but pretended to be the light that should glint. I pulled back the end. "Careful," the boy said, too late. My thumb had struck an edge, so cleanly that it took a moment for the blood to register what had happened. Then it came, short, neat. "No knife will do that," the boy said, laughing nervously. "I heard."

I put my thumb in my mouth, tasted iron, and behind the taste was that subtle sound again, one only I seemed to hear: a roar that wasn't one, more like the promise of a roar, like a city breathes before it screams. I looked out at the expanse of water beyond the piles. A moment ago it was empty, then it wasn't empty anymore. Not because there was anything to see. Because I suddenly had the feeling I was being looked at. The sea can do that. It has more eyes than we do, and most of them aren't where we're looking.

"Sign here," said the payroll clerk, who had crept up to me like a balance sheet one wanted to forget. "Musterrolle. You confirm that you are subject to the ship's rules and that the sea is not within the jurisdiction of our insurance." He said the last part as if it were a joke he didn't like. I signed. My hand was steady, my head was not. With each stroke, I felt some part of me grow lighter and another heavier. I handed him back the paper. "Fine," he said, tapping my name with the blunt tip of his pencil, as if trying to press it into the fibers. "Now you belong to someone. If you're lucky, it won't be you."

The frigate's siren suddenly let out a blast that blew the seagulls into the air like shotgun blast. Conversations broke off, then started again, louder than before. The officer raised his hand, meaning everything and everyone, and for a moment even the wind obeyed. "Second rehearsal in an hour," he shouted. "Secure the cargo. Anyone who steals today is stealing from their own grave."

He looked at me, not for long, just enough so that we both knew he knew who I was. Or who I was supposed to be.

I took a step toward the side of the boat, so close that the wetness from the tar jumped onto my coat. Below me, the water slid in long, weary streams. Clinging to a post was a piece of seaweed that looked like a green, wet glove. It rose, fell, rose, fell, beckoning to me in a rhythm that didn't fit the harbor. I could have sworn it sped up three times, then slowed down three times. A code without letters. I blinked. It was seaweed again.

"Did you see it?" Conseil asked from behind me, without looking. "Whatever you think you see, memorize it. You'll need it soon to explain something that refuses to be explained." He stepped beside me, leaning the way you lean on a railing to avoid accidentally tripping. "I learned at the city market: If you want to tell a lie well, find a truth that fits alongside it."

"I'd better find a knife that fits next to it," I said, weighing the blade the boatswain had handed me. My hand liked the weight. My head liked the lie in my voice.

The one-eyed man had disappeared again. Not gone, just somewhere else. Men like him are coughs: if they're not there, you know they'll be back. The oil film on the water separated into two tongues for a breath, closed, and became one again. Somewhere behind the crane, someone called a name, three times, as if calling a dog that didn't belong on this block. A beam of light flickered on, rummaged through the afternoon soup, lingered, twitched, and went out. The click echoed, small and sharp.

I thought about what the secretary had said in the office, about men who didn't come home that evening. I thought about the round cut in the metal of the folder, the waxy ink of my signature, the still-burning thumb. I thought about the name I couldn't suppress, and didn't speak it. Not here, not now, not in front of the water. But the water knew it anyway.

The noon bell rang from somewhere beyond the rooftops. The policeman crossed off the next line on the list in front of the guardhouse. A seagull circled above us, gray as bad news. Someone near me whispered a prayer that sounded like apologizing to a knife. I pushed the brass disc deeper into my pocket until it pressed against the envelope that told me what to do if the unthinkable became completely normal.

“Any more questions?” asked Conseil, not mockingly, just as if he were clamping the world together with words.

"Just the old ones," I said. "And a new one: How much depth can a person endure before they start to like them?"

He laughed briefly, shook his head, and looked at the spotlights returning to their positions. "Ask me when we get back up."

“And if we don’t get back up?”

“Then ask someone else.”

The quay took a breath, as cities do before they do something bad. The ship stirred a little, the ropes sighed, and the crew noticed at the same time that the clouds hung lower. I thought as you sometimes think when you've signed something bigger than yourself: too late. Too late, too soon, it doesn't matter. The weight had already chosen the direction. We were only steps on a plank being led out into the air, with water below that smiled without showing teeth. And somewhere, as sure as the next click of the lamp, the invisible heart beat with the patience of a machine that knows the night is longer than the courage of the men who glare into it.

The afternoon tipped into a gray twilight that settled over the harbor like a second layer of skin. Nothing was decided. Not day, not night, only that sticky in-between state in which the men speak louder so they don't hear the crackling between seconds. The guardroom continued to buzz like an angry beehive. Names that had lingered in throats for too long were called out. Some men stepped forward and pronounced them neatly, as if to prove they still owned their syllables. Others muttered as if ashamed of the letters that clung to them like debts. The policeman with the mustache made a U-turn, his pencil even shorter than before, but the man had the patience of an executioner. Behind him was a blackboard with rules that no one wanted to read, and everyone followed them because otherwise they died faster than usual.

"Volunteers with... backgrounds, this way," called out a second, meaning men whose files were wetter than their shirts. They lined up, their faces pinched, with that brave indifference that only people can have who know they no longer have the right to be indifferent. The promise was simple: Come out with me, and a few pages will disappear from your history. I saw one, who couldn't keep his hands still, touch the piece of paper with his name on it. He smiled briefly, as if someone were sewing a patch over a hole he'd torn in his own

pants. Another had a tattoo, the kind you don't want to see on your upper arms when officers are around. The officer saw it, looked away. These days, muscles were more needed than morals.

The one-eyed man was back, as if evening had spat him out. He leaned against the wall of the guardhouse, where the water had convinced the plaster to give up years ago. His empty eye stared at the gangplank, his kind eye at me. "If you go down," he said without greeting, without nonsense, "you'll come back up a different person—if at all." His voice was a rough cloth smeared over something smooth. "The sea is not a church. It doesn't forgive. It reinvents you or devours you. In between, there are only men who lie."

"You sell slogans like a fishmonger sells bad mackerel," Conseil growled. "And yet someone still buys." He was talking about me. He was right, and I hated him a little bit for it. I looked at the envelope in my pocket; it suddenly felt warmer, as if it had grown ears.

"I don't sell anything," said the one-eyed man. "I give away warnings. No one takes them, so I'm rich in leftovers." He leaned toward me, his breath smelling of harbor and a disease that medicine names when it can't cure. "Take a word for it from someone who's watched too long: If you meet him—" He waited for me to interrupt. I didn't. "—don't speak first. Let him speak. If he's silent, go. Silence is his language. And whoever learns it forgets their own."

He left me standing there like a letter dropped into the wrong mailbox. I would have liked to push him away, but my hands were busy with themselves. I felt my own blood in my fingertips, as if there were little drummers on duty whose rhythm didn't suit me.

On the frigate, they continued tinkering with the spotlights. A finger of light swept across the quay, caught on a puddle that refused to shine, and slid onward as if it had resisted. That click in my gums when the lenses click into place. I heard it as if my head were a small theater, and someone backstage called for the props.

"Bet!" someone yelled at some point, and the word jumped like sparks. A movement went through the men, as if someone had snapped an invisible string. I turned around, and there stood Ned Land, standing on a box that could just as easily have been his lectern. He had the look of a man who knows he doesn't need the hall to be loud. His harpoon leaned beside him, not as a threat, just as a fact. "Seven days," he said, and his voice carried surprisingly softly, as if there were fur in his larynx. "Within seven days, I'll see the beast.

Not a story, not a shadow, not your mothers in their nightgowns. I want eyes in the water. Metal eyes, if you ask me."

Laughter, murmurs, whistles. One shouted at him not to stick out his tongue so far, the seagulls might mistake it for a sausage. Ned didn't grin. "Bet: one case of rum for each man who bets, and two cases for those who think I can't do it. If I lose, I'll pay back my share—in work, in blood, in whatever you've come up with, as long as I can lift it."

"And if we all see it?" shouted one man with more courage than teeth. "Then the boxes will be empty before they've even been counted."

"Then you'll drink faster than you scream," said Ned. "And I won't taste any of it because I'll have something else in my mouth." He pointed to the water. They laughed ruefully, the way men laugh when they suspect the joke might outlive them.

The officer intervened, half-heartedly, which is to say: he did what officers do when the crew is having fun. He stood next to the source of fun and declared it a duty. "No gambling on the dock," he barked halfheartedly. "Bets will be recorded on board, otherwise voided." He noticed Ned's look and smoothed his uniform with his hand, as if that were a way to superimpose decency over a wrinkle. "Seven days," he repeated, as if it were his idea. "Sight report in the logbook. By the rules."

"Rules can swim?" asked Ned. The officer did what he did best: He didn't hear the question.

The crates with "Land" on them were pulled onto the gangplank. I noticed how many hands twitched as they passed. Rum soothes and corrupts at the same time, a moral double exposure. An old sailor, who looked as if the sea had returned him as a favor, briefly held my sleeve. "You're the one looking," he said, and his tone was neither friendly nor hostile. "Look at this." He pulled up his shirt. A long, thin line ran diagonally across his ribs, as clean as if someone had drawn a thread through them with a cool smile. Not reddened, not savage. Civilized violence. "No knife can do that," he said, almost apologetically. "I'm not afraid of blood. But this one didn't bleed, as if it were too proud for that."

I nodded. There was nothing clever to say. The one-eyed man was right: the sea either reinvents us or eats us. Sometimes it does both at once and calls it efficiency.

Conseil arrived with a roll of canvas under his arm, which he declared was sleeping gear and which was 60 percent bandages. "They keep lists of the bets," he said, half mockingly, half alarmed. "I didn't know you could inventory appetite."

"You can inventory everything," I said. "Even what you don't have yet. Especially this." I felt the brass plate in my pocket. It had changed temperature, or my fingertips had. I held it as if it were an amulet that no one had consecrated. It weighed little and meant a lot. That's how good chains work.

That roar again. Not loud, not clear. More like a memory of a roar. As if somewhere a large, slow heart were practicing, with no way of knowing whether it would still occur today. I looked beyond the piles, where the water lay dark, and it seemed to me as if someone down there was pulling a long thread, taut, with the kind of patience known to no man. A spotlight didn't find the thread, of course not. Lights are blind to things not of their making.

"Will you open the instructions before we depart?" Conseil asked, his tone neutral. He meant: Do you want to know today what will be required of you tomorrow?

"No," I said. "I don't want to ruin my fear. It works better when it's fresh." He laughed briefly, teethless, a laugh that was just noise. "I'd rather have you cynical than dead," he said. "But I'll take what I can get."

A small group of harbor police marched past us like an idea that's been delayed. The last one in line nodded at me as if we'd shared a bad joke years ago. "You're looking after yourself?" he asked, and I heard that he'd chosen the wrong words and knew it. "We're looking after the lists," he corrected himself, but by then the sentence had already stuck in my mind.

"He'll fit," Conseil said on behalf of the officer. "If he falls, I'll catch him. If I fall, no one will catch me." The officer pretended he hadn't heard. Fulfillment of duty: the art of conducting conversations bordering on meaningless and still believing you've done something.

Ned Land approached us again, this time without crates. Sweat beaded on his brow, but his face didn't resemble a man who had carried something. More like that of a man who feels better when gravity exists. "Seven days," he said again, as if carving the number into the air. "If I don't see it, I'll eat the deck. If I see it, we'll eat the rum." He looked at me as if he knew I had another bet in my

pocket—the one on the truth. "And you?" he asked. "What are you betting on?"

"To what I don't want to see," I said. "All the bullshit that remains is true." He nodded slowly, the kind of nod you make when you realize someone isn't going to play nice.

"I once hunted something that didn't bleed," he said suddenly, his voice flatter. "Kept me awake for six nights. The seventh night I slept and dreamed I was water. In the morning, I was no more awake than what I had hunted. Since then, I've known: Some prey hunts back."

"And that's why you love her," Conseil said quietly, not as an accusation, but more as a diagnosis. Ned shrugged. "What else? Love that doesn't bite back is suds."

The siren sent a second wave through the air, deeper, longer. Men moved as if someone had tied ropes to them and was now pulling. The lists were furled, the hooks on the quayside were checked, the curses were civilized. The officer looked in our direction, briefly, and I recognized that look that turns others into chess pieces. I've never been good at chess. I argue with horses.

"Last errands!" someone called, and in the city, the shops that only open when decent ones close came to life: a bottle man with greasy labels, a grocer with pills that are supposed to beat the sea out of your stomach, and a woman with a box of dried snakeskin, selling it as good luck. Conseil bought sewing kits; I pretended that was wise and bought matches instead. A match is honest. It gives what it has and then dies.

On the way back to the quay, matches in my pocket, I paused briefly because the ground beneath me vibrated. Not strongly, not for everyone. Just enough to let me know: The invisible heart had remembered again. A spotlight clicked into position. The beam caressed a corner of the water, which pretended to giggle. Beyond the harbor wall, a black shadow passed by like a thought too fast to finish. I blinked. Nothing. Of course nothing.

"If it's a man," I said suddenly, to no one in particular, "then he wants us to come. If it's a machine, the man who builds it wants us to come. In both cases, we are the courtesy they give themselves." Conseil tugged on my sleeve. "In both cases, we're late," he replied. "But late counts as being on time at sea."

The one-eyed man stood against his wall again, like a comma the sentence couldn't shake. "Seven days," he croaked in Ned's direction. "What if he gets you in six?" Ned raised his hand, not as a threat, but more as a weary blessing. "Then someone else will get the case," he said. "The rum already knows where it's going."

I placed the brass plate between my thumb and forefinger again until it ceased to surprise me. "Let's get aboard," I said. "Before the city gets the idea to hold us back." In truth, it was the city that was pushing us. Cities do that when they realize you're no longer of any use to them: They send you somewhere where you're no longer a burden to them. The gangway glistened from the drizzle as if it had been freshly painted. Two sailors stood on either side, their faces made of stone, their hands of rope. I placed my foot on the first plank, and it was as if I were stepping into another alphabet.

"Wait," Conseil said suddenly, holding me tighter than he expected. "One more thing." He looked at me as if I were a knot being checked before hand. "If he makes you an offer—" He broke off, searching for the word, but couldn't find one he liked. "—if he pulls you by a thread that looks like reason, cut it. No matter how clean it seems. Clean threads are the most dangerous."

"All right," I said. "I'll carry a knife." I raised the knife the boatswain had given me. The blade drank in the light without getting drunk. "And in case of emergency, I'll carry two."

"If necessary, I'll carry you," Conseil said dryly. "But don't make it difficult for me."

We started moving again. Behind us, the city closed like a mouth. Before us lay the deck, short, hard, honest. Somewhere in the distance, a man tore open an envelope, and paper rustled as if imitating the rain. Ned Land was already up above, his harpoon loose, his gaze fixed on the water as if it were an old enemy against whom one no longer wanted to waste anger, only skill. He saw us and nodded almost imperceptibly. I nodded back. A contract made of glances. No office could print anything against that.

"Seven days," I said quietly, not as a bet, but as a prayer that didn't want to be one. The invisible heart out there didn't answer. It didn't have to. It had time. We had rum, knives, lists, lamps, guilt. That was usually enough to make it the first few meters. After that, the only thing that helps is what has drawn us here: hunger. And hunger is never in a bad mood. It's always there, punctual, polite, tireless. Just like the name I didn't say, but which stood within me like a second

spine. I felt it without thinking it. And the water—I swear—briefly lifted my skin, as if it had smiled.

The city had that kind of evening that makes no decisions: a tired sky that sits on the chimneys, water that acts as if it were glass, and faces that have spent all day rehearsing what looks like indifference. Farewells aren't a spectacle here. They're a tax. You pay them, curse quietly, and leave.

We went the last lap, the way you always do one last lap when you know the next one will be longer than you'd like. Conseil counted bandages in his head, as if they were sins. "Twelve large, eight medium, five small," he muttered. "Two bottles of laudanum if anyone shouts too loudly, and one for you in case you get the idea of using thinking to stop bleeding." He paused, tightened the ties on the canvas roll, and looked at me as if I were a wound he couldn't heal. "Do you have something to say goodbye to?"

"Myself," I said. "But the guy doesn't deserve an audience."

The landlord stood in the doorway of his pub, without a sign because everyone knew what it was called when it was closed: none at all. He didn't have his rag in his hand, making him look almost naked. "I've got nothing for you," he said, which in landlord language means: he's got something. He disappeared, came back, and put down a bottle, without a label, the cork carved from a wooden spoon. "Not rum," he explained. "Rum makes men brave, who look better dead. Water is for prophets. This is in between." I raised the bottle. "In between water," I said. He nodded, as if I understood him. "And listen: If you meet someone downstairs who smiles kindly, run. Kindness is a weapon down there."

The one-eyed man was there, of course. He's everywhere the city loses something. He wore a nice hat so the police would think he was a decision-maker, not a person. "I'd wish you luck," he croaked, "but luck is as steady as the tide. Comes and goes, and no one promised it. So all I wish you is that your knife is faster than your questions." He tapped my pocket with his bony finger, right where the envelope with the instructions lay. "Don't read it until you think you have something else to say. After that, you'll just listen."

"And you?" I asked. "Who listens to you when we're gone?"

He grinned, his bad eye glistening with moisture. "The sea. It likes lies, if they're well told. And I'm practicing."

We walked past the stalls selling everything no one wants to admit they need. A man with pockets full of nails, which he called "protection." A woman with dried fish bladders, for seasickness and loneliness, optional. A boy who lined up matches as neatly as if they were recruits. I bought a few more, even though I knew the ship would have more light than my head. Matches make honest promises: I'll light them, you watch, we're even.

At the edge of the quay stood women who belonged to no one and to everyone. They smoked, laughed, not too loudly, not too quietly, and joked with their hands. One waved to Conseil, and he waved back, with that small, sad raising of the fingers that says: You deserve better, I do too, and no one gets it. Another asked me if I wanted to get married, but her voice betrayed that she only wanted to know if I would pay. "I'm marrying the sea," I said. "It doesn't take witnesses." She laughed, shook her head, as if I'd dug up an old, bad joke that still fit.

At the corner of the guardhouse, where the wall has been peeling off for years and the salt has turned the bricks into sugar, stood the secretary from the office. No hat, no jewelry, just her hands in her pockets, her gaze on the lists on the table. She acted as if she were there by chance. Coincidences are rare in ports. "Sometimes," she said, without looking at me, "they forget to cross the names off the lists. Then the women at home think the man is still on the way, even though he's already been addressed at the bottom." She rummaged around, pulled out a pencil, and sharpened it on the wall as if she were sharpening a knife. "You can cross yourself out if you want. Saves someone work." I snorted. "I've never saved work. Not even my own."

“Then at least write legibly,” she said, and went back into the crowd, so quietly that I wondered if I had just made her up to make myself seem smarter than necessary.

The officer rehearsed his speech in his head. You could see it in the way he held his mouth: as if he were already bearing the weight of words no one wanted to hear. Around him, discipline grew like weeds. Men were clearing crates too heavy to clear. One stepped onto a pile of rope, slipped, caught himself, and acted as if it were planned. The searchlights made those short, painful coughs that make the lenses quiver before revealing their cat-eye. That clicking continued to eat into my jaw, as if the nerves in my teeth had decided to serve at the front.

"You can still go now," Conseil said suddenly, kindly, like telling a dog that it doesn't have to cross the street. "No one's holding you back. Debt is for land.

At sea, it's about gravity and breath. You can take on new debts later. Different ones. More honest ones."

"I'm not here because of the debt," I said, and that was more true than I liked. "I'm here because of the hole in the map. And because of the noise that isn't a noise." He nodded, as if I'd said: because of the intoxication. In his way, it was the same thing.

We rested on an upturned crate that had been born as a bench, even though it pretended to have once been full of oil. I pulled the envelope from my pocket just to check its weight again. It wasn't heavy. The things that kill you are rarely heavy. They're small and fit in your pocket. "Open it," Conseil said. "Or throw it away. Cowardice lies in between." I put it back. "I'll save the cowardice for when I need it later."

Ned Land stepped out of the ship's belly as if the deck had taken him over and spat him out again. He still had oil on his hands, rubbing it off on his trousers, to no avail. "Goodbyes," he said in that almost mild tone that great men sometimes pull from their jackets when they briefly forget how to threaten. "I hate them. If it has to be done, people should disappear while I'm working. Then I'll save myself the look." He looked at my bottle. "This isn't rum."

"Zwischenwasser," I said. "The landlord swears by it. It helps with what doesn't help."

"The only thing that can stop friendship is distance," said Ned, took the bottle, drank it, didn't flinch, and handed it back. "I like it when things say what they are." He looked over my shoulder at the women, at the children who didn't know if they were allowed to wave, and at the men who pretended they didn't have any. "The city is never as honest as it is right now," he murmured. "Everyone shows what they want, and no one gets it."

Meanwhile, the one-eyed man held court among the volunteers with histories. He dispensed advice like bread and butter, harshly and too late. "Write your name twice," he said to a man whose hands were tattooed, as if someone had laid a plan on his skin. "Once for yourself, once for the one who forgets it." The man laughed and said he already had three names, and no woman had ever been satisfied with just one. "Then take a fourth," croaked the one-eyed man. "The one the sea gives you." People laughed because they didn't want to cry.

We walked along the quayside once more. Below us, the slate surface, where the oily film once again formed those two tongues, twisting and kissing and

arguing until they became one again. I remembered the sailor from the bar, the clean scar that didn't bleed, as if blood were no longer currency. I remembered the round cut in the metal of the officer's briefcase. I remembered the roar of the previous night, the heart that wasn't one. I remembered a name I didn't want to say, because it spoke itself, even when I remained silent.

"Write something down," Conseil said suddenly, for no reason, without emphasis. I fetched some paper I'd bought at the market and the pencil that had been through too many pockets. What can you possibly write at a time like this? Truths are embarrassing, lies are exhausting. So I wrote an address. Not a real one. The kind you give God when you know he won't reply. Then I wrote "Return to Sender," because that seemed honest to me. I put the paper in the bottle—not the one for the day, but another, empty one—and stuffed grass inside so it wouldn't clink. I didn't throw it in the water. I put it back in my coat pocket. Maybe there's a post office for it after all.

At the guardhouse, the policeman with the mustache read the rules for the third time, as if they had shrunk in the rain and needed attention. "No fights on deck," he said. The men laughed. "No women on deck," he continued. The men laughed differently. "No blasphemy on deck." Silence. "No betting on deck." Laughter that sounded like someone had blown the air backward through a horn. He sighed, smoothed down his mustache, and signed the blackboard with chalk, as if signing his error.

The officer finally delivered his speech. It wasn't bad. Speeches are never bad at times like these. They're just carved from a wood the sea doesn't like: smooth, varnished, that can't stand salt. He spoke of duty as if it were a cloak, of home as if it were a furnace, of glory as if it were more than a card on the table of a man with soft hands. He said "Royal Navy" as if the words had to be swallowed like medicine that costs more than it helps. The men listened as men listen: with half an ear, half a stomach, and both hands at work.

Meanwhile, I looked at the faces. An old sailor was counting the wrinkles on the deck with his lips, as if he could read the weather from them. A young one was red up to the neck, with fear, with rage, with both. One had his eyes closed, praying to something that had broken his fingers. At the edge of the heap stood the secretary again, or I imagined she did. She didn't blink. Good witnesses don't blink.

"Goodbye now," shouted someone who was chosen to tell people when they were allowed to feel. Couples found each other, just for seconds. Hands that wouldn't let go, let go. Someone pressed a letter into my hand, with no name,

no request, just paper on which tears had dried into salt. "If you..." began the woman in the apron. "I..." she said, and the "I" fell into the mush of noise and wind and became an "everything" that no one understood. I put the letter next to mine, and suddenly I felt like a mailbox full of things that will never be delivered.

Ned Land stood near the gangplank, carving notches into the harpoon's shaft with his knife. Not boastfully. Bookkeeping. Each notch a memory. Some narrow, some wide. "One for goodbyes," I said. He nodded. "That one's at the bottom," he said, and I knew what he meant: the one you don't carve because it never ends.

"When we come back," Conseil said, and that was the first time I'd heard him say it, as if he believed the word. "When." I smiled. "When we come back, you'll buy yourself a bed without fleas." He nodded seriously. "And you," he said, "will buy yourself peace of mind that doesn't come in a bottle." We both knew we were making bets without knowing the bank.

The seagulls circled lower, as if looking into the men's pockets. A child ran across the quay, stumbling, laughing, because children always laugh when men walk. The headlights clicked as if practicing pleasantries. The siren took a breath, just one, as if clearing the throat before drowning out the throats of others. And there it was again, the roar, so distant, so close, that I didn't know if it was coming from the water or the wood beneath my boots or the box in my chest that claimed to be a heart.

"It's time," said the officer, and everyone acted as if he had made it up. "Not yet," said the sky, which refused to go completely dark. "We're leaving," said Ned, without roaring. "We've already left," said the film of oil on the water, which spread out into two stripes and then came together again, as if something below were waving a hand that no longer had any fingers.

I kissed the bottle of Zwischenwasser, not out of love, but out of superstition. Conseil shoved his second bandage into my coat pocket, as if one could make a pact with cloth. The one-eyed man raised two fingers, as if blessing us with the wrong hand. The innkeeper stood in the doorway again with a rag, to make sure everything was in order.

Farewells aren't a spectacle here. They're a noise level that drops before the ropes are released and the heads are already. I carried my name in my chest like something one doesn't reveal for safety's sake. Next to it, the other, the one who wasn't mine, throbbed. And I swore, without moving my mouth, that I

wouldn't say it first. Not today. Not until the deck began to speak beneath my boots.

"Come," said Conseil. "Come," repeated Ned. "Come," hissed the water on the stones. I went. Behind me remained the city that never says goodbye, only takes stock. Before me stood the ship, pretending to be an answer. And in between, right at the level of my teeth, hung a word like a hook. I kept my mouth shut as long as I could.

The deck made that sound wood makes when it knows it's about to leave the land. A soft, satisfying crack, like teeth rubbing together to steady themselves. Men walked without running, and ran without looking like they were. One shouted, "Lines ready!" The next shouted the same thing, only louder, and the third acted like he was the first to think of it. Above us, the sky pressed down on the masts, and the city pretended to grant us the goodbye it never truly means.

"Foredeck, line four!" yelled a boatswain whose voice had always been at sea. The ropes cracked, smacked, and let go like so many small, offended mouths. The bollards on the quay suddenly seemed sad, those thick iron nubs that shouldn't hold anyone when it counts. A young sailor slipped, caught himself, laughed too soon, and received a slap that promised to be a piece of advice later.

The officer stood where men who believe they are important stand: amidships, a little elevated, so that he had the illusion of living above things. "Cast off!" he said finally, not too loudly, because he wanted to make the moment heard. The siren took offense and screamed as if it were the true authority. Seagulls soared, the women on the quayside became shadows and then nothing, and the men who pretended not to wave didn't wave—so they did.

The tugboat growled, a small, angry iron dog, dragging us out of the stable by the chain. The water between the hull and the quay wall became dark, misshapen, as if it were hiding a burden one would rather have forgotten. I felt the jolt through the planks, the kind you feel in your knees when you know that from now on, no one can simply get out without getting wet and being twisted, first by the current, then by the sky.

"Engine ahead – slow!" shouted someone who knew how to delegate words to metal. Below us, the belly of the frigate gave its first, hesitant breath. A deep hum that knew no arrogance. Anyone who has ever seen the first step of a drunk who wants to go home and knows they'll make it knows this hum. It says:

We're going. Whether we get there is another story, but the first is powerful enough.

Ned Land stood at the bow, his harpoon like a dog on a leash. He didn't look back. Men who look back were never paid for what lay before them. He studied the surface of the water as if it were a face in which he was searching for faults. Beside him, a sailor adjusted the spotlight, rehearsing its position, and that click cut into my teeth again. The beam of light switched on, scanning the dirty skin of the bay, brushing against pilings, nets, crates, as if bidding farewell to everything he might later miss.

"Anchor ready to hoist!" yelled the boatswain. The chain lifted, link by link, wet rust weeping old water. A scrap of seaweed clung to it like a stray veil. The winch groaned, but it did what it could, with the stoic injustice of things built to obey. Men pulled, men cursed, men laughed at men who cursed. And in all the noise, I heard the other thing again: that distant, steady drone that didn't belong to us and yet was there, like a thought that came into the room long before you and now acts as if it were your guest.

"Pilot on board!" someone called, and a small man with the self-respect of a pilot was already standing where he belonged. He cast glances that were currents, raised his hand as if it were a compass, and whispered directions that were harsher than commands: "Not into the alley, free the chain... more rudder... good..." The officer acted as if he were leading, but it was the small man with the salty eyes who led us through the narrow throat of the harbor, to where the water begins to make its own decisions.

Leaning on the quay was—of course—the one-eyed man. He looked smaller now that we were no longer his volume. He raised two fingers, twisting them as if he were winding an invisible thread around the air. His lips moved, and I knew he was blessing us with some obscene litany that only in this city counts as a prayer. I raised the bottle of Zwischenwasser, a silent gesture, and he grinned as if I'd just slapped him in the face with good intentions.

"Spotlight, sweep to port, slow!" shouted the officer. The lens whirred, swiveled, the finger of light drew a white scar through the scum. For a heartbeat, there was nothing but dirt and water and the lazy breath of the bay. Then, I swear, the beam seemed to strike something that had no name: not hard, not soft, but there. A twitch ran like a cold shiver through the men nearby, and no one said, "Did you see that?" because they all knew they had. Then it was gone, the twitch, the finger slid on, and the lens clicked, as if insulted that it had been subjected to an illusion.

Conseil stepped next to me, his hands restlessly on the roll of canvas. "Do you—" He broke off, smiling thinly. "Of course you do. You collect such things like other people collect receipts." I nodded, because talking at times like these does the wrong thing to things. Words are sometimes just lids, and the wrong lids make pots boil over.

The tugboat released us, and suddenly we were the ones pulling. The city behind us shrank to the size of a mistake you could afford when you were younger. Puddles glittered on the roofs, and the windows watched us go like eyes that are married and know you won't write to them. I breathed in the smell, which was now less city and more sea: salt, tar, metallic future. The oily film on the water did that trick again—dividing into tongues, kissing, arguing, joining. A sign not meant for us, but we read it anyway.

"Logbook ready!" someone called, and a young man who looked as if he had been folded from clean paper opened the book. The first page of the exit: date, hour, weather, visibility. I saw his pen hesitate when he reached the line that isn't in books: destination. He looked at the officer. The officer looked at the officer within himself. Then, without moving his mouth, he said: "Target Alpha." The clerk wrote "Target A" with a period so small it looked like shame. And that's exactly what it was: a name that didn't want to be one.

No one said the other word. The one that lay behind our teeth, playing with our tongues. It hung between us like a lamp, out yet shaping the shadows. Ned spat over the railing, and the saliva disappeared with the efficiency of a command. "A goal is a goal," he said quietly, as if speaking to the wood. "Names are for songs no one sings when things get serious."

The searchlights were dormant, their lenses like cold eyes, still blind. We would need them later, when the night fully opens its mouth. For now, the twilight, this silent crime in the daytime, was enough. A sailor brought me a small lantern, not as a gift, but more as a leveling gesture: one more to see what he didn't want to see. I took it, didn't thank him, held it by the handle as if it were a dog that didn't yet know who it belonged to.

The pilot path led us past the city cliffs, where the stonework ceased to pretend to be a coast. A cross stood on a rock, poorly carved, well-intentioned. Someone made a sign that was half religious and half tic. I thought of the secretary who spoke of names that will never be struck out. I thought of the envelope in my pocket, which wasn't heavy and yet still pressed. I thought of the round wound in the metal in the folder, of the sailor with the neat scar, of

last night's roar, which sounded closer today without being louder. I thought of the word that didn't fit in the logbook.

"Engine ahead – half speed!" came the order, and the vibrations in the planks changed their sentence structure. A hesitant murmur turned into a furtive, persistent rant. The ship told the water that it had no time for pleasantries. The water did what water does: It negotiated by pretending to give in. We won because the negotiation had only just begun.

"Bream ready!" "Sheets on!" The liturgy of movement swept across the deck, and men became part of a sentence only the sea understood. Conseil checked his gear for the tenth time, as if one could fold order into the future. I put my hand on his shoulder. "Breathe," I said, and he laughed at me, as if I were suddenly a priest. "I breathe when I can afford it," he said. "Now I'm saving up."

Ned stepped past us, harpoon loose, his gaze over the railing toward the horizon, which wasn't one, just a darker line in a dark gray. "Seven days," he murmured, more to the wave than to us. "Less if it's polite." I watched him as you watch a wolf, hoping it's guarding your lair and not your neck. There are no guarantees, only stories someone tells later, if one survives.

From the stern came the clinking of a small bell—not the big one that keeps track of time, but the small one that changes meaning. The officer raised his hand, as if he still had an opinion. "The hunt begins at sunset," he said, and I thought: The hunt began when someone in a bar in this harbor said a name too often. I felt the ship hold its breath and let it out again, deeper now, more resigned, ready.

We passed the last buoy of the entrance. She nodded as if she were part of the city administration: "Remember to return." The pilot made his brief farewell, nimbly jumping into his boat, which looked like a punchline that wasn't needed when the joke was already hurting. He watched us go until his hat was nothing more than a punctuation mark on the water. And then we were out. No more walls to train the wind. No more alleys where the rain becomes polite. Just surface, depth, direction.

"Lamps cold until dusk," the officer called. "Assign watches. No chatter at the bow." He meant: Think quietly. We didn't. Each of us spoke, in our own heads, to things that wouldn't answer. I pulled out the envelope, held it up to the dying light. "Confidential Instructions" it said, as if confidentiality were a cure. I put it back. Not yet. Let the fear stay fresh. It's the only one with a sense of timing.

The city was now just one less color on the palette. The water took its place, magnanimous, relentless. On the horizon was a grayish rift that promised to later turn black. The air became different—not colder, not warmer. It became more honest. You smell fewer people, more elements. More intentions.

And then, just before the moment when the night truly says, "I do," it happened. A fellow on the lookout, one of those quiet ones you only notice when they see something, leaned forward as if something were tugging at his forehead. "There!" he didn't shout. He just made a sound built to grab attention, not tear it apart. Ned was faster than the sound, his harpoon half-raised, the muscles of his forearms like maps of his decisions. The officer raised his hand, the bell fell silent. The men breathed in a language I understood without words.

The searchlight came on, even though the command was "cold." Someone had decided that rules could wait. The beam shot out, dead straight, as if insulted that it hadn't been allowed to come on earlier. A wave broke, as if afraid of the light. Then I saw it—or thought I saw it, which is the same thing here: a long, narrow shadow just below the surface, too straight for life, too alive for steel. The beam passed over it, thinning for a moment, as if there were something drinking it in. My heart made the mistake of remembering: the roar, the oily film, the round gash in the metal, the name that didn't fit in the logbook.

"Target—" the officer began, his voice breaking as he climbed over a slippery patch. "Target A. Visual contact... possible." The clerk scratched. Ned breathed calmly. Conseil, beside me, whispered something that was too quiet even for him to call a "prayer."

The shadow disappeared. Not because it left. Because it decided we shouldn't see it anymore. That's a difference you feel later, when you're back on dry land trying to sleep peacefully. The spotlight stayed in place for a few seconds too long, as if in defiance. Then it clicked off. The click told me more than any light.

"Guards one, two, three, as ordered!" shouted the officer, wrapping his mistake in discipline. "No one encourages superstition." The men nodded, the men looked away, the men thought the opposite. I ran my fingers over the brass plate in my pocket, as if its contours were a support. It helped as much as stroking a coin against a lifetime's debt.

We set a course out. Not toward a point—toward a possibility. Behind us, the city gathered its lights like a dress that no longer fit. Ahead of us, the sea gathered, dark and without velvet. The frigate vibrated, content with the task

greater than its wood. Ned crouched over the bow, silent, ready, without patience. Beside me was Conseil, the scientific pessimist, who always has hope up his sleeve because he wears bandages. And inside me: a word like a hook.

No one said it.

But everyone knew what we had untied the ropes for.

Night fell, and what came next smelled of salt, oil, lens flare, and lies that didn't yet know they would help us. The hunt had counted its seconds and had finished warming up. We had rum, steel, cunning, and courage that liked to live on credit. And somewhere out there, just beneath the sentence the spotlight was writing, something was waiting that didn't have to wait. We sailed toward it, polite as debtors. And the sea, old and unmoved, didn't blink. It had long since decided who would name whom.

Drinking on the high seas

The morning smelled of onions, iodine, and false promises. Somewhere in the belly of the ship, a pot was singing, and no one could get the song out of their heads because it was the only thing here that still pretended to have a chorus. The sky hung low like a curtain that was too heavy; the sea wasn't angry, just resentful, and that was worse: these long, indifferent waves that commented on every step. I washed my face from a bucket that had already seen too many faces, and the water tasted of tin and the night before. Next to me, someone was rinsing his stomach as if to prove that there are still things that go by choice on this deck.

The path to the galley was a narrow gap between crates, ropes, and men's moods. One sailor clung to the side of the ship, staring at the horizon as if the word that would make him look again were there. Another played with his cup, turning it, tapping it on the planks as if he had to beat the time out of it. Steam rose from the kettle that smelled of something that wanted to be goulash, but at sea, words are generous. The cook had hands like shovels and the expression of a man who knows that love in food is overrated as long as there's salt. He

filled bowls, didn't count, and if someone came twice, he acted as if it were the first time. There are saints here too, they just don't wear halos, because on deck everything that glitters attracts the wrong kind of mosquitoes.

The ration came as always: coffee that was offended that no one would leave it; bread that told the truth to your teeth; and the swig from the bottle that no one called by its name. Officially, it had no name at all. It was simply there, if you knew which handbag which coat was currently unattended. Rum makes men brave in the first half hour and stupid in the second; in between, it lies and pretends to be medicine. One poured "intermediate water" from a nameless bottle into his mug, and the smell was exactly halfway between sin and thaw.

"You drink early," said Conseil, his voice as always: like the thread that holds the bandage together without claiming it's the skin. He sorted through the gauze, the needle, and the thread as if they were cards with which he shuffled a future that would never be his. I shrugged. When the sea gets its hands on your head, you take what you get. And the sea had long had its fingers where thoughts are too soft.

The engine spoke. No thunder, no stumbling. A gentle, dark hum, the manners of a beast that has learned that showing its teeth only wastes energy. The hum migrated from the belly of the ship into the bones, where it was more comfortable. Those who don't believe in gods eventually come to believe in engines at sea. You stop listening to them and later realize you've been breathing on them the whole time.

The searchlights waited for their evening. Until then, they stood on deck like silent priests, cleanly polished, cold eyes that hadn't yet decided whom they would judge. A young lad was polishing a glass ring as if it contained a plan of salvation, and each of his fingerprints looked like a promise he wouldn't keep. Another sound ran diagonally beneath it all: the clanging of chains, ropes rubbing the salt out of their fibers, the shallow slap of the waves against the hull—and above it all, that imperceptible click that crept out of the searchlight mechanism when someone turned the crank, just to hear if the world still clicked into place. It crept into his teeth, lodged itself in a molar he'd ignored for years, and reminded him of the purpose of pain.

The officer gave a short speech, the kind of speech you miss when you're trying to sleep: watches, assignments, punishments, the ban that no one takes seriously anyway. He spoke of discipline as if it were bread. Bread is scarce, discipline is not; it's distributed generously. His boots were cleaner than the handrails, and that alone was enough to make half the men mentally crouch.

He pronounced "Target A" like something you carry in your breast pocket at night and hope it doesn't break through.

Ned Land emerged from the crush, his harpoon loosely slung over his shoulder as if it were a hammer, and the deck covered with nails. He didn't drink much, but when he did, he drank in a way that made you respect the bottle afterward. He looked at no one and saw everyone. Two sailors were arguing under their breath about the bet—seven days—and you could tell the number was slipping into their heads like a screwdriver into an old lock. One claimed he'd seen the shadow last night, the other swore that shadows don't drink light, and if they do, it's only to belch. Ned listened without listening, and I saw his fingers searching for the shaft like a prayer he knew only with his hand.

Seasickness is the democratic side of the sea. It strikes the strong first, so the weak don't think they're miserable because of them. A broad-shouldered boy from the harbor watch stood there, green-faced and reeking of courage that could take no more. Conseil pressed a piece of lemon into his hand as if it were a badge. The boy looked at him as if he'd been honored. He bit into it, hunched his shoulders, and stood his ground, even though his knees wanted him to. Later, he'd say the lemon saved him. Truth at sea is the sum of the things that didn't kill you.

Between two crates, I found a half-empty bottle, pretending it belonged to no one, and put it back in a shadow that didn't hold it against me. I've learned that you don't have to take everything the world throws at you. Not out of morality—morality here has the durability of wet straw—but out of caution: things that are too easy to get often belong to an annoyance that has learned patience.

The day didn't rise, it crawled. Clouds came, went, forgot us, and that was perhaps the nicest thing they ever did. We practiced maneuvers that have been practiced for centuries, and each time the crew pretends it's new so no one can see how old their fear is. "Clear for boats," "Clear for dinghies," "Clear for nothing" – the shouts had lost their wit and retained only their bones. A boat was lowered halfway into the water, then raised again, just to see if the hinges still knew what gravity was. Someone shouted "Caution," exactly one second too late, just as always, and a third laughed, because laughter is the only thing that isn't on the lists.

Towards midday, the engine found its rhythm, the deck floor its vibration, hearts their imitation. The roaring in my ears became a carpet on which thoughts stumbled when they went too fast. I leaned against the bulwark and

looked out, where the line between water and sky was merely imaginary. An old sea dog once told me: "Out there, there's no up or down, there are only reasons not to fall." I never asked how many reasons he had left.

"Work!" cried the boatswain, and the word fell heavily from his mouth, as if it were the same weight in any weather. Men heaved, tied, shoved, as if sweat were the oil they paid for. One rehearsed the spotlight base, just a slight swivel, barely visible. The click came again, finer, very fine, and I swore that at the same moment, over there, beyond the rail, I briefly saw a shadow in the film of oil part. Nothing that can be proven. Just the kind of nothingness that appears at the right times, like an old debt ledger someone suddenly rediscovers. I blinked, and the film was one again, good and shimmering.

"You look into the water too much," Conseil said, without looking up because his hands were busy negotiating with gauze. "The water looks back. You don't want it to like you." He had that tone of voice that reminded me he'd held my bones too many times to compliment me.

A few boys were building card houses out of cigarette papers in the corner, as if the sea were a gentle table. One coughed, the house fell, and everyone feigned surprise, so that at least something new would happen. The officer cast his shadow over it, and that was enough to declare the poor construction a sin. "No gambling!" he snorted, and since he didn't have a theft to stand on at the moment, he stood on paper. The men nodded, smiled, and continued later, when his shadow was somewhere else.

Ned was conducting an unofficial drill. No orders, no list, just a circle that formed naturally. He explained nothing, he demonstrated. The harpoon lay in his hand as if it had grown on him. Weight over his hip, breath not held, throwing not with the arm but with the memory of all things that were once too far away. As the iron flew, the deck made a sound that only wood makes when it briefly thinks of land. The point rammed into a makeshift sack attached to the side of the ship, and the whole line of men exhaled as if one had passed a test for them all. He pulled the harpoon back, a smooth release, without shame, and I saw the notches on the shaft. Each notch a day, an animal, a mistake, a man? You never know.

The afternoon took on the color that one considers normal outside and depression inside. It was the hour when the first tiredness asks the second if it won't replace it. I went to the stern, where the propeller forced the water into a track that looked as if it would stay - it never does. The air tasted less of city, more of what the elements leave behind when they're too lazy to kill. And just

when I thought that maybe the day would just pass, there was swearing somewhere on the starboard side. Not the ordinary swearing that's like breathing, but the hearty swearing that men use when chance has just decided it'd like to be a director after all.

A rope holding a crate didn't slip, it gave way. The crate tilted, slid, and caught on a cleat. Two hands too late, three voices too high. "Hold on!" "Stop!" "Careful!" – words that always come when they can no longer hold on. I was closer than necessary, grabbed, Conseil grabbed with me, and others too. We caught the thing; the crate growled like an angry bear whose bars had been opened briefly and then left undone. When the hands were sorted, I looked at the end of the rope. Not frayed. Not scraped. A clean edge that looked as if a cold, dull blade had severed the thread of the world without caring.

"No knife will do that," I heard myself say, and no one objected, because everyone just acted like they needed to look elsewhere. The boatswain mumbled something about "old fibers," "salt," "overload," the words you use when you don't want to point the finger somewhere where thinking hurts. He stuck pitch on the spot that didn't have one, tied a knot older than his grandmother, and declared the matter past. The deck nodded. I didn't write anything down because I didn't need anything to write down: the cut had already been etched into my skull.

Later, when the bell stole an hour it didn't deserve, I sat down on the side of the ship, legs braced, gaze somewhere between the nonexistent lines. The coffee grew cold beside me, because coffee at sea is always born too early. A shape hummed far below—perhaps the engine, perhaps the sea, practicing how to imitate a heart again. I drank the cold coffee out of spite. It tasted of tin and of the word no one uttered. Behind me, someone tied a noose, not for a neck, for a barrel, but the gesture looked like history.

The day acted as if it were leaving. The evening acted as if it were coming. The ship held its position between them. Men spoke quietly about things they didn't believe in and acted loudly as if they believed in themselves. I thought of the guy from the bar who had talked about clean cuts. I thought of last night's light, which drank instead of shining. I thought of the bet and the guy with the lemon who was learning to stand like an old man.

And I thought, as you think when you know that what you're hunting might not bleed: If it doesn't get you with its teeth, it will get you with patience. The sea has more of that than we do.

The drill began before the coffee realized it was awake. A fife that had never learned music ripped the air to pieces, and the pieces became men who acted as if they had always been there. The officer dished out orders like yesterday's bread: harsh, necessary, without love. "Clear the foredeck! Scrub the wooden floor! Grease the winch section! No private conversations, no bottles, no excuses!" That "no" hung over the deck like a second heaven. Someone laughed too loudly, as if confused as to which of them was vomiting and which was singing. The crew's replies came in chorus, that blunt "Aye" that sounds as if throats themselves had a uniform.

We knelt and scrubbed, the planks rough like old thoughts. The salt water bit into our ankles; soap and sweat became one. A boatswain walked along the line, running his boot over the floor, probing like a priest searching for sins on a brow. Where his shoe didn't slip, there was a curse and a second round. The sea rocked the whole place just enough that a man never knew whether his discomfort came from it or from himself. Behind the masts, a rattle from the engine, that muffled "yes, yes" with which iron entrails greet the day.

The headlights stood silent, like dead eyes in glass. A young man was polishing lenses, and every time he lightly tapped the crank, a dry click pierced my molars. The sound wasn't loud, but it scratched. It cut into my thoughts, thinned them out. Those who never thought about teeth on land think about it every minute here. The mechanic next to the boy threw grease onto a spindle; the click softened for three breaths, then sharpened again, as if it contained an intention no one had signed off on.

Rum wasn't officially planned. Unofficially, rum was always planned. You don't drink on the water because you're thirsty, but because you don't know what to do with the silence between orders. So the little economies appeared: a cup of "intermediate water" here—the innkeeper had given us a lesson learned—a sip from a bottle that lived in a rope basket and smelled as if it had had a career. The cook was hacking at something that, from a distance, could have been meat; proximity belied this. A stoker emerged from the den with a sooty throat, coughed the night out of his lungs, and let a sailor cauterize his throat with something soft. "Just medicine," said the sailor, unscrewing the bottle. At sea, medicine can be anything that burns.

The officer smelled that the day was getting too kind. He ordered the watch to form, pulled up a locked box, and made it an altar to virtue. "Search," he said dryly. "For reasons." Reasons grow faster than mold on ships. Men had to empty pockets, unfasten boots, lift caps. Everything that shouldn't have been there came to light: two corks without a bottle, a bottle without a cork, a bone

pipe, a knife with a blade as blunt as a bad poem. A young fellow had diverted laudanum from the sick roll; Conseil stood to the side and pretended to watch the sky. He didn't look, but his hands grew heavier in his pockets as he calculated what he would be missing that evening.

When they got to me, they found nothing but a pencil, a piece of paper with nothing written on it, and a knife that didn't look very nice. The officer weighed it in his hand. "Even for cutting bread?" he asked. "Even for thinking," I said. He didn't like that sentence, threw the knife back, and pulled his pipe out of his mouth longer than necessary, so that the wood in his hand seemed like a judgment. Then he turned to the searchlights. "Trial in two glasses. Anyone who clicks without an order will continue clicking in the holding cell."

Ned Land stayed out of the drama. He threw when no one was looking: short, dry casts at a burlap sack that looked as if it had once been a man, then a pig, now a target. He didn't speak, but when his harpoon kissed the side, the whole deck listened. The officer saw it and looked away; authority figures don't like crew doling out respect without stamps. Between casts, Ned took a sip from a cup too clean to be official. "Six more days," a man behind me muttered. "If he loses, we all lose. If he wins, we lose, too." It was the kind of logic that makes sense at sea.

Around midday, a piece of rope that had been temporarily hanging from the lamp carriage overnight was tightened. The boatswain cursed, because temporary rope always lasts longer than expected at sea. He coiled, he pulled, he checked. I bent down and noticed what had already rubbed my eyes yesterday: the end of a second strand that had been lying in the box, neatly coiled – a clean cut. Not the sad fraying that salt causes. Not a soft thread that grows tired. More like an unapologetic edge. "Who cut this?" I asked, too casually to remain casual. The boatswain tossed me a piece of pitch. "The sea," he said, as if it were a joke he couldn't explain. "Now shut up."

The roar returned, so deep that you only noticed it when you forgot to breathe. A stoker swore it was the engine in the lower beat. The mechanic swore the engine had only one beat, and that was his. An old sailor, who claimed to have seen everything since doomsday and remembered nothing, spat over his shoulder: "The deep is singing. In a minor key today." The officer called "Quiet!" and quiet came, taking the form of a stone and lying among the men, in the way.

In the shadow of the crane traverse, someone was trading courage in small glasses. Not rum, not water, something from the belly of the city. "For the

teeth," he said. "Against the night," he said. "Against the truth," no one said. Two took, one hesitated, the fourth watched to see if the officer wanted to saw the round. I watched as the hands that were to be thrown against "Target A" reached for warm glass. No morals. Just static: When the cold in the head gets too loud, men prefer to hold something warm in their hands.

Conseil tied and cut. That morning, he had stitched the heel of a boy's hand after he had slipped while scrubbing: three stitches, as neat as an art class. "Not too tight," he murmured, "otherwise the skin will scream as it works." I watched him because I liked the calmness of his fingers. He spoke to the boy without stealing comfort. "Rinse in the evening. If it throbs, it throbs. If it sings, let me know." The boy nodded bravely, held his tears to the edge, and swore that he had never sung in his life. Men swear a lot when needles are near.

In the afternoon, as the sky changed from leaden gray to the more interesting gray, the officer switched on the searchlights. "Retract, extend, zero position! Crank one, crank two, swing, stop, swing!" The young polisher grinned helplessly in the circle of light, the lens heavy as a confession, the click back, regular like a lie believed because it has structure. The beam searched across the deck, jumped into the water, drew a bright gash through the smooth skin, and then stopped in one place, as if there were some resistance that no one had ordered. "Onward!" shouted the officer. The beam obeyed, the resistance continued to shine. The officer acted as if he hadn't noticed anything. Men noticed it and did the same.

Paranoia found its form, as always when too much order meets too much disorderly water. Someone whispered that there was a knocking on the hull below – three short, two long, three short. Another claimed to see lights at night blinking in time with the engine, as if trying to communicate. "With whom?" someone asked. "With the one who gives good answers," said the whisperer, and the sentence stuck like a wet rag. A stoker assured them that in the coal bunker, someone had scratched names on the wall that no one on board bore. The officer ordered paint over them, twice. The paint shone for half a day, then salt ate away its composure. The scratches were there again, defiant, ignorant. Maybe they were different, maybe the same. The men looked more closely and saw… patterns, the kind they wanted to see.

Late in the afternoon, two men clashed—not out of enmity, but out of hunger that didn't know where to go. One bottle too many had been passed around, one word too heavy. Fists, no drama, just those swift, honest blows the sea accepts when it's bored. Ned stood by, not stopping, not stirring up trouble. "Two more for the night watch," he muttered, "then at least someone will stay

awake." Conseil intervened, not heroically, more like someone who wants to prevent his bandages from becoming statistics. The officer made them both spend an extra hour on the bow "to count the waves." Punishment sold as therapy. They left, puffing, and actually remained sober for a while.

The sabotage against sobriety wasn't small, by the way. Someone had "refined" the coffee pot at lunch. Half the guard smiled at places where there weren't any jokes. The officer tasted it, looked around as if searching for a father. "Who?" he didn't ask. "Never again," he said very quietly. For an hour afterward, the coffee was black as guilt and tasted just the same. By evening, there was that faint sweetness again, which makes men brave for ten steps and stupid for eleven.

Later, I stood at the bulwarks, the sky an old shell no one holds to their ear anymore, and the ocean acted as if it were calling us by name without needing one. The roar was there, barely there, like putting your ear to a cupboard door and hoping no rat is holding its church there. I put my hand to the wood. It vibrated, cleanly, without anger. Not our rhythm. A different one. I said nothing. When you give words to such things, they become citizens.

As the light test was run again, the starboard searchlight carriage jammed briefly. The mechanic called out, "Wait a minute," and the deck held its breath. I jumped over, not to help, just to look. Grease, gear ring, rivet—all honest. Except for the thin, almost cute little band of fibers wrapped around the axle, like a gift ribbon. I pulled on it. It was rope. But not frayed. A clean edge. A piece so narrow, as if someone had patiently separated threads until only pride remained. "Where did...?" asked the boy with the polishing cloth, and his voice broke because it had expected an answer that wouldn't make a fool of itself. "From the wind," said the mechanic, and we all knew that the wind in this town was too clever to play knives.

The next round went smoothly, as if the ship had decided to reward us. The beam went out, came back, and lay against the mast like a dog. "That's enough," the officer called. "Cover the lenses. No playing around." He walked away, his pipe back in his hand. Men exchanged glances the way you deal cards when you think the dealer is cheating.

At the edge of dusk, three crouched on the quarterdeck, close to the lantern box, whispering about "spies." Not for a crown, not for a counting house. "For him," said one, not meaning a name. "He doesn't need spies," said the second. "When he comes, he'll already know everything." The third kneaded a piece of

tow, balled it, laid it down again, as if an answer were hidden within. I walked past without looking. Paranoia grows when it feels seen.

The ship did what ships do when the day slips into their pockets: it made itself smaller, tighter, more concentrated. The watch moved closer to the railing, as if that would keep the night at bay. Ned checked lines, metal, his harpoon. He ran his thumb over a notch, paused briefly, and smiled toothlessly. "It'll be louder tomorrow," he said. No one asked "why." It hung in the air like a bill coming due because the clock says time is money.

I went to the sick roll. Conseil had made order, the kind you only see when you've known chaos. He looked up, shook his head, and then I asked. "Two skulls, two hands, one knee, one pride. Nothing you need. What do you need?" I reached into my pocket, felt the envelope that promised "Instructions" like a cheap prophet. "Perhaps later," I said. "When my head starts lying to itself." He nodded. "Then come to me first. I sew lies tighter until they can't breathe."

When the bell changed watch, darkness finally climbed aboard. The searchlights remained cold, their lenses covered with cloth, like eyes asked to judge later. The click was gone, and that, of all things, made my gums tingle. Missing sounds at sea are always louder than those that remain. Somewhere a cup clinked, somewhere someone called their own name to the wind to hear if they still belonged. The engine hummed, and underneath it crept this other thing: no hum, no threat, just patience. A patience that cannot be learned. One that learns you.

"Sentinels to your posts!" the officer called, and the night accepted it without making a note. Someone opened the coffee, which smelled sweet again. One swatted the cup away, cursed, and vowed to finally stay sober. I believed him for the next ten minutes. Then I went to the bow, leaned over the wood, and the ocean stared back, unblinking. I thought of clean cuts, of bands around axles, of lights that make their own rules. I thought of how easily men hang the world on a hook when they sense someone below is playing with the line.

Night placed its hand on our heads and pressed gently. Not to kill us. To test how much air we still needed. Behind me, someone laughed—too quietly to be cheerful. In front of me, the sea sounded as if it were practicing a sentence it intended to repeat later without a single slip of the tongue. I waited for the click to return. It didn't. That was almost worse. Then I set off, teeth clenched, hands empty, feeling as if I had just begun to pay a price whose currency I didn't yet know.

Boredom moved like a pale snail across the deck, leaving behind a slime of conversations that led nowhere. Then the snail decided to go and die, because Ned showed up with a barrel and the kind of face that gives men fits of sense. The barrel was whitewashed, one eye painted on it, crude, angry, as if one of his paintbrushes still owed him. Two sailors were pulling a towline through it, knot-tying in unison, and the boatswain acted as if it had been his idea. The officer was late, as officers who know everything in advance are. He looked at the barrel, the line, the men, the sky. "Fifteen minutes," he said. "No drama. No heroes." He meant: I need this as much as you do, but I'm going to hate it if it works.

They threw the barrel overboard. It splashed, dipped, resurfaced, lingered in the wake like a confession too heavy to sink. The sea took it, not kindly, only professionally. Ned stood at the bow, harpoon at his hip, explaining nothing. He raised his hand, pointed at the line, then at the eye. "Don't look," he said. "See." That's the whole lesson of weapons: You look at targets, you see movement. The men nodded, the way men nod, hoping the sentence will roll past them and still leave something behind.

He threw first. No wind-up. No poseur. A brief forward flick, a half-audible out, and the iron flew as if it had been in the air for weeks. The point kissed the barrel under the eye, slid deeper, tore wood, water popped like sparkling wine for people who will never see champagne. A short "Hah" went through the line, not the elation landlubbers make when something goes right. More like the affirmative grunt of a machine regaining its rhythm. Ned reeled in, checked the latch, counted something on his fingers that only he needed. Then he passed the harpoon. "You."

The first volunteer wasn't willing. He stumbled into the role like a man into a marriage chosen by an uncle. Breathe, pull, throw—the iron flew askew, caught wind, took a stand, sunk too short into the water, and came back up insulted. Laughter, the measure. The officer whistled briefly, not reprovingly, just to remind himself that he existed. The next one was better, the third worse, the fourth surprised himself: the tip hit the edge, the line vibrated, the barrel spun like an offended moon.

I got my turn because the line reached me like a bill that suddenly knew my name. Ned handed me the shaft, heavy, familiar, and the cold of the metal told me that honesty is rarely warm. "Not with your arm," he murmured, so quietly that only his fingers heard. "With your back. And don't think until the point is in." I pretended I could. Weight, step, hip, go—the iron flew not badly and not well, it flew the way things fly that would rather walk. It kissed the wave beside

the barrel, slipped past my eye, and shouted a joke to me that I didn't understand. I reeled in. Ned nodded, not friendly, not angry. "You can. Later." Later, at sea, is a word like credit.

The bet grew in the air like a second mast. No one spoke it out loud, everyone spoke it along. Seven days – the number clacked between the teeth like an ill-fitting crown. Now there were small side bets: three hits in a row, the first cut on the edge, a shot through the eye. The number-slave, who just happens to be there when numbers appear, suddenly stood there with chalk, acting as if he'd just been born by chance. He wrote lines on the plank as if they were gnats to be swatted away. I even liked him at that moment. Numbers are at least honest in their emptiness.

The young lens polisher was allowed to go too. He held the harpoon as if afraid of doing something to it. His breathing was wrong, his grip too tight, his iron too early – it splashed so far wide that even the sea giggled briefly. The officer made a gesture that helped no one. Ned didn't take the harpoon away from the boy; he let him reload, slowly, explaining with the patience of a man who knows that skill prefers to disguise itself as accident. "Don't look at the eye. Look where it will be when you hit." The boy nodded, missed again, but this time the miss had direction. That's all you need sometimes to stay alive: a planned miss.

The sea didn't make it difficult for us, nor easy. Small waves that came from a poetry department no one had ordered. The barrel pulled the line, trembled in the wake, jumped, dived, and resurfaced. An old sailor grumbled behind me that he hadn't seen a drill in 20 years that didn't eventually become serious. He had the kind of voice that makes the future lazy. I wanted to agree with him, but didn't, because that would have insulted the moment.

After the fifth round, something happened that I had already seen in my head: The line suddenly went taut like an offended string, the barrel gave a short curtsy, and disappeared beneath the surface. Not a clumsy sucking in, not a dramatic ripping away. More like a polite "I'll be right back," which made the sea believable for a moment. Men cursed, men pulled, men called for their mothers, for God, for bad luck. Ned was already halfway to the bulwarks, hook in hand, the officer shouted, "No one to the rail!" and everyone was at the rail.

The line swung back, slack but not wearily. We pulled it onto the deck. The end wasn't an end, it was a statement: a clean edge, smoother than some officers' foreheads. No frayed death, no salt-chewing. A cut like that made by things that don't have to sweat. I held up the end. Conseil leaned forward, his eyes

narrowed. "Not our blade," he said. "Not yours," the boatswain repeated, and his tone said: Keep it low, or the sea will hear we have words.

"A reef," said the officer, without body language. "Sharpness on the edge. Not marked on any chart. We'll note it." The payboy nodded, twice too often. Everyone nodded, once too few. The air suddenly smelled more of metal than salt. I swore a whiff of oil was drifting on the wind, hiding behind a knot that had done nothing wrong.

Ned leaned out even further, boathook in hand, feet cleverly placed, hands foolishly brave. "There it is," he murmured, and sure enough, the barrel lifted its white back for a moment as if to catch its breath, then danced away, a meter, two, four. A tug in the line that wasn't one. Ned stretched, another inch, another, his boots searching for purchase, found deck, found a grip, almost found water. I grabbed his girth, Conseil grabbed me, someone grabbed Conseil. A chain of unthinking decisions. The hook grabbed the barrel, the hook slipped, grabbed again. Then we had it, wet, insulted, alive.

"Back on deck!" yelled the officer, and his voice sounded as if it had finally found something it could control. We pulled the barrel over the rail, and it lay there, dripping, innocent, as if it knew nothing of the cuts that happen when no one is looking. Ned turned it, tested the impact, tapped it with the back of his hand as if hearing a heart that wasn't one. "Back on the line," he said calmly. "Double knots. And if it tries to run away again, we'll let it go. I don't chase what tries to run away until I've invited it in."

Laughter, genuine, dry laughter that swallowed the air instead of letting it fester in people's heads. The officer buried the laughter beneath an order. "Go on. Exercise is over when I say so." Ned nodded and didn't say it. Men pulled, tied, and put the barrel back in the water. The payboy wiped the chalk off the board, as if that could erase the cut from the world.

The next few throws were better. That's the thing about the sea: when something goes wrong, the body learns before the head catches up. The harpoons hit, slipped, hit again. One ripped the barrel open so cleanly that his eye split into two lids and stared at us, doubly insulted. The ranks moved closer, as if to keep his success warm. A stoker, sooty in the face, hit something that moved for the first time in his life and pretended he had only coughed. Ned left him alone. Great men know that small victories need no witnesses, only space.

Every now and then, the officer raised the lenses, as if he had to prove to the day that it was almost over. The stream brushed over the water like a cold hand checking that the child was still breathing. It paused briefly on the spot where the barrel had just dipped, and the stream thinned a finger's breadth, as if something were soaking in it. I saw it, I remained silent. The men looked away to avoid talking. The clicking in their teeth was back, more tactless than before, and the mechanic closed the lid on the grease can, even though he had just opened it.

The young polisher had another turn. His hands trembled less. He breathed as he'd been instructed and threw as he couldn't be instructed. The point didn't hit the eye, but the rim, where the wood was still fresh from the last hit. A beautiful, useless success—beautiful because it wasn't luck, useless because the target was different. Ned nodded. "Enough for today," he said to him, and only to him. The boy grew two years older in a second.

An argument broke out on the forecastle, garnished with the scent of forbidden coffee. Not about rum, for once; about the question of whether the barrel should be called a "she." One said all things hunted are women, another said this one was a "he" because it loads, spits, and remains silent. A third decided it was neither, it was hunger with wooden skin. They weren't fighting, they were beating the air with words. The officer was just about to recite the regulations when the boatswain arrived with the cut piece of rope in his hand. "What do we do with this?" he asked, and the officer said, "Throw it away." The boatswain didn't throw it away. He put it in his pocket. Men collect evidence, even if they don't know what for.

The exercise didn't end, it continued. Men dispersed with that inaudible relief one feels when leaving a church where no one has been tortured. One wiped the shaft of the harpoon, slowly, lovingly, as if there were fingerprints there that must not be lost. Ned sat on the railing, legs in, gaze out, and drank from the clean cup. He offered it to me. I took it, because refusing is bad form. "Four days," he said. "Maybe less." He didn't say it as a bet, more as a diagnosis. "If she's smart, she'll make us sweat. If she's proud, she'll come when the lenses are warm."

"And if it's not a 'she'?" I asked. "If it's a tool. An opinion on wheels." Ned swiped his thumb over a notch on the shaft, paused as if counting. "Then we'll talk to the man who holds it," he said. "He won't have time. Neither will I." He smiled humorlessly. "And you'll want to write. Don't. Write afterward. If there is one."

The sun gave up without saying why. The sky pulled the gray over your head like an old shirt, and beneath it came the darkness that always sits and just waits for someone to open the door. The headlights were stripped of their cloths, like blindfolds before a duel. The click was on time again, the beam scanning the water, our faces, the barrel hanging outside again, as obedient as a dog that knows full well it's going to run away today. The number-teller crossed out the last chalk lines and looked as if he'd cooked up a soup of numbers that no one wanted to eat.

Conseil tied a thin strip of gauze around my thumb, which I'd torn while reeling in the fish. "Just so you don't hold onto yourself," he said. "Blood is bad for your grip." He pulled hard, but not so hard that the finger was offended. "What did you see?" he asked without looking. "Everything and nothing," I said, because that's the only answer that doesn't lie before nightfall. "The cut," he said. "Yes." - "The thinness in the light." - "Yes." - "The roar?" I nodded. "Then keep your mouth shut until later," he advised. "If you say it, they'll make a flag out of it."

The last round of barrels ended with the kind of hit you wish for in stories no one believes: Ned hit the eye, half in the gloom, half in defiance, and the men said nothing, because some things don't grow when you look at them. The officer acted as if he had given the order. The mechanic acted as if he had invented the axle. The payboy acted as if he wasn't writing it down. I did what I do best: I memorized the silence that settled on the deck afterward like dust, only heavier.

Later, when the bell had agreed with the first star, the clicking fell silent for a long minute, and I didn't know whether to be grateful or suspicious. The barrel hung outside, the rope doubled this time, and somewhere beneath the surface something said very quietly "no," so quietly that it almost sounded like "yes." I could have laughed. I didn't. The night had open ears. I kept mine closed as best I could. Only my teeth wouldn't stay still. The clicking continued to live within them, independent, diligent, dutiful, like a junior civil servant who loved overtime.

The men disappeared into their stations, the winds spoke to metal, the officer counted time in bells, the payroll clerk counted numbers in chalk, the mechanic counted cogs in wheels, Conseil counted stitches in skin, Ned counted notches in wood. I counted cuts that shouldn't have existed. And somewhere out there, something was counting us.

The afternoon was the color of old tin, and with the color came thirst. Not the real thirst that dries your throat, but the other thirst that sits between your ribs and claims to be justice. Someone had parked a bottle in a rope basket, camouflaged with tow and a sacred "barrel sticker" that must have once meant "oil." The smell betrayed the lie: warm, sweet, with the kind of promise men at sea want to hear after they've just obeyed.

"Just a sip," said one. "Just for the sound." The crew's tone promptly dropped an octave. A second took "for the back," a third "for the teeth." Then someone came along, who took nothing and wanted everything, pulled the cup away from the second, the second grabbed his hand, the hand grabbed a word, the word grabbed back—it was the beginning of an explanation no one wanted to hear.

It happens quickly when wood and men live too close together. One thrust still counts as fun, a second that's already a tally, a third that doesn't require a receipt. A cup flew, clattered, its contents spilled across the planks as if we'd blessed each other. Two men went at each other, not with poise, just haste. One had a mooring pin in his fist, the other the wrong kind of courage. I was standing before I knew I was standing. Conseil was faster, his hands searching for the right places, where you deactivate muscles without touching hearts.

The officer shouted something about order, but order has poor ears when the bottle is still talking. Men lashed, men pushed, the deck remembered the term "mass grave" and reluctantly retracted the idea. One tripped over a rope, another over a curse. Ned emerged from the shadows like a correction that comes too late and yet saves everything. He grabbed the one with the mooring pin by the collar, not brutally, just with that determination that says: Not today. The guy snarled, turned, and at that very moment the sea played its usual joke—a quick, malicious nod under the keel—and the wrong guy started to slide.

He hit the bulwarks, turned, grabbed, found nothing but air and old paint. One foot was already over, then his knee. A remnant of him was still on board, the rest somewhere else. I jumped, grabbed his belt, felt how leather turns into a snake when water laughs. Conseil hooked his arm through mine, someone hooked through Conseil's; it looked like friendship, felt like a steering chain. "Leash!" someone yelled, and the word beat back against the masts like a crow that no longer wants to fly.

The line hanging from the railing net should be where it always is. It was there—until the moment it wasn't. I saw the end, and my stomach

remembered every old lie ever neatly told. No fraying, no salt-stained bristles still holding a shred of honor. An edge so smooth it looked like tongue. The man slid on. Ned was already over, halfway over the rail, one boot on wood, one on sky. He caught the collar of the sliding man, the collar creaking as if he knew he was making a career today. The bosun threw a throwing knot, the throwing knot came too late, I just got there, Conseil came anyway, and together we brought Meat back to its place.

The rescued man lay panting on the deck, spitting out plank dust, snot, and an agreement to be debt-free from now on. "He pulled," he gasped between two coughs that came from his back. "From underneath. Like... like a..." He searched for the right animal and found none. The officer stood over him, his pipe in the corner of his mouth as if it were a legal statute. "No superstition," he said. "The man tripped. That's all." The rescued man nodded eagerly, because you live by such sentences. But his gaze remained fixed on the water, as if the water had promised him something not on the lists.

The boatswain held out the end of the line to me. I didn't have to touch it to see the cut. But I did. It was the same old, new bad habit: no tugging, no tearing, no telling. A decision. "Makeshift," the boatswain grumbled for the record. "Salt, aging, stupidity." He retied the knot, double-hooked it, cementing the guilt with pitch. "And if I catch the one who goes aboard with claws..." He finished the sentence with a look out to sea that was more of a plea than a threat.

The bottle was bagged, properly this time. The officer handed out punishments like coats that were too small. "Watch at the bow. Two bells overhang. No tongue longer than the line." He had the guilty ones cleaned, the innocent ones carried, and the clueless ones counted. Men nodded. Men immediately forgot. Men only remembered the necessary: who would stand next to whom today if things slipped.

I didn't feel my heart until it was back where it belonged. It was beating too fast for a machine and too steady for a human. "You're bleeding," Conseil said, pointing at my ankle. A superficial scratch, nothing, but it smelled of iron, and iron here always smelled of the wrong kind of truth. He squirted it with iodine, which honestly burned. I honestly cursed back, and then he stood up, without comment. We each had our own style of tenderness.

Ned sat down on a crate, cup in hand, harpoon leaning against it. He didn't look tired, just focused. "That," he said, without pointing to the line, "wasn't a sea. The sea is too proud to cut so cleanly." He drank, not much, then stood up

again, as if the cup had only asked if he was still there. The officer acted as if he hadn't heard the sentence. He clung to words like "duty of care" and "regulation." Words that don't help when the water is your enemy.

The mechanic crawled over the lamp carriages, pretending to be busy, maybe even being busy. I didn't help him; I just stood there and heard the thin clicking creep back into my teeth. It sounded shorter now, sharper, like a needle testing the skin before it's really ready to work. "Grease," grumbled the mechanic, "and rest. That's all the axle needs." He gave the spindle a finger's width of lubrication; the clicking held its breath for half a minute, then continued as if it were concerned with principles.

The bottle hadn't survived the beating. Its remains glistened in the cracks between the planks. One man wiped, growled, wiped more thoroughly. I watched as the sweet smell permeated the tar until it no longer smelled like promises, but like dirt. The counting clerk shuffled over, chalk on his belt, examined what couldn't be counted, and did the only thing he could do: He wrote something in his notebook that looked like numbers and tasted like comfort.

"Change of guard!" someone yelled, his voice already hoarse from being used too much today to make sense. The new faces bore the same weariness, only fresher. A fellow with a scar that looked like a stern comment stepped to the bow net, as if to test if it would stay put this time. He touched the new knot, then released it again, as if he'd burned himself. I understood him. Some knots are like confessions: you feel dirtier when you touch them.

The sky turned to dusk, and the searchlights were blessed. Down curtains, cranks, and the clicking began like an accountant who loves overtime. The first beam swept flat over the water, leaving a bright scar in the sea's surface, and paused for a moment, as if it had found something that wouldn't go away. "Go on," said the officer, and the beam obeyed, but I swore it did so reluctantly. Meanwhile, the rescued man stood further back, staring with narrowed eyes in the same direction the light had just stopped pointing. "He pulled," he repeated so softly it sounded like breathing.

Small economies of revenge began as they always do: senseless. One cursed the wood, another the soap, a third the city that produces men with no knowledge of linen. I cursed my fingers, which were still trembling after the iodine. Conseil listened to all the insults as if they would one day become symptoms to be noted. "Drink something that doesn't sting," he told me.

"Water?" I asked. "You're joking when you're healthy," he said, pressing his mug of weak tea into my hand. It tasted of tin and common sense.

The officer made the guilty parties at the bow count the waves until their eyes gave up counting. "Quiet," he said every third time, and the deck couldn't get any quieter without sinking. Behind us, by the lamp carriage, the mechanic pulled a thin, dark thread from the axle, wound it around his finger, and held it against the lamp. It was rope, again. So thin that you could accidentally mistake it for a thought. The end—of course—clean. "Where did that come from?" asked the lens polisher, whose voice still didn't know how to sound old on a deck. "Wind," said the mechanic again, and everyone did him the favor of believing him, see you later.

Then, almost politely, the belly of the ship announced itself. A sound that was not our hum. Not loud. But it had the kind of patience we don't possess. I put my hand on the plank, because sometimes you need hands to understand what ears reject. There it was. Steady. Not mechanical, not alive. More like a plan that has learned to play patience. "Machine?" the officer asked aft. "An engine is an engine," the stoker shouted back, offended that he was being mistaken for chance. The drone didn't go away, so we did what men do: We pretended it was ours.

I lingered a moment too long at the cleat where the broken rope had been retied. The rescued man stood next to me, pushing his fingers under the edge, as if testing whether the wood still liked him. "Why clean?" he asked, more to the air than to me. I could have lied. I could have said: Salt. Time. Bad luck. Instead, I said nothing, and that was the most honest answer I had.

The fight over the bottle had long since become a new myth. In every story, someone else was to blame, and in every story, the narrator would have saved the man alone if everyone else hadn't gotten in the way. I let them talk. Words are better than knives, as long as they stay in the mouth. Ned remained silent, the harpoon at his shoulder, his gaze outward. He's not the man who comforts you; he's the man who wants to find you later, when your name no longer fits on lists.

As the bell called dawn to duty, the searchlight shone once more on the exact spot where the barrel had been submerged that afternoon. Briefly, the light dimmed, as if someone were drinking from it. No one said it out loud. A gust of wind took away the smell of oil, so faint that it perhaps existed only in our heads. The officer blew smoke in that direction and acted as if he had accomplished something with it.

"Enough drama," grumbled the boatswain, more to calm things down than to end them. He tied another knot, pulled again, checked, nodded, grumbled again. "No heroes tonight. He who falls, falls quietly." He meant: Don't scream when you go. The man with the scar nodded, as if he had understood the order.

We were distributed among the posts, like letters in a word that no one wants to read aloud. In the sick roll, Conseil arranged the needles as if they were arguments. The mechanic placed his thread in a tin bowl as if depositing proof for the morning when someone would ask why we act as if cuts were normal. The payroll clerk closed his notebook and looked as if he had just lost a number he liked. The officer walked the line, whistling, silent. Ned crossed a notch that had already been there before the day began and didn't make a new one. "Tomorrow," he said, and I didn't know whether he was referring to the cut or the confession.

The sea heaved its shoulders. The ship acted as if we were prepared. Thirst crept back into our ribs, insulted but patient. And beneath it all lay this steady, polite drone that didn't come from us and yet counted our steps. We did what debtors do: We acted as if we still had time. The night nodded. It had everyone.

Night didn't come, it crawled. First it took the horizon, then the faces, finally the voices, until even the cursing sounded muffled, as if speaking through a wet glove. The wind died down, the engine remained polite, and over everything hung that polite drone that wasn't ours and yet acted as if it were counting our breaths. The officer tinkered with his pipe, as if it could be used to polish order, and proclaimed the liturgy of darkness: "Assign watches. Light discipline. No chatter at the bow. Log in half bells." It sounded as if he was putting us to bed. No one was sleeping.

I was given the outpost on the starboard side, where the searchlight rests on its carriage like a dog that doesn't yet know it's vicious. Conseil stayed with the sick roll, which is always well-attended when men think they have nothing. Ned took the bow: no coincidence, just gravity in human form with a harpoon. The mechanic and the lens polisher crouched like two believers by their pulpit, whispering with screws. The paymaster, uninvited, clamped himself to the railing and acted as if night also had to be registered to count.

The lamps had their cloths removed, the lenses breathing coolly. "Only on orders," the officer shouted, as if light could be rationed like rum. "First, star bearings, then careful veils. No continuous beam unless absolutely necessary." He did what men with lists do: He declared the sky a corridor. One of the

lookouts raised his hand, pointed upwards, and said, "No stars." He was right. The clouds acted as if they were carpet, and we, lying on them, should behave ourselves.

The first coffee of the night stank of courage in installments. Someone had refined it again, just a hint, that sweet aftertaste that makes men believe they're probationary heroes tonight. I took a sip, let my tongue work, and spat into the sea. The sea acted as if it were a donation and didn't thank me. "You're wasting quality," murmured the stoker, who lit a cigarette next to me, as if he needed to lend the darkness a second heart. "I'm saving myself," I said, "for that which wants to save us."

The protocol hung laminated in our minds, even though no one had ever seen it: three short blows to the hull – alarm, two long ones – incorrect triage, one short one – a mistake that no one later admitted. Whoever sees light reports; whoever sees shadow remains silent; whoever sees both drinks water. That was how it was planned, "for reasons," as the officer said when he was at a loss for words. I had other reasons: the faint click of the headlight mechanism creeping back into my molar, and the thought of ropes that don't break, but rather make a decision.

Towards the first half-glass, the ship released its night odor: tar, oil, cold iron, iodine from the sick roll, a shot of beans from the galley that no one had ordered. Across the water came something that smelled like fish and wasn't fishy. I leaned over the railing, felt the cold that wouldn't get colder, and heard—nothing. That was the bad thing: there was nothing to hear, except us. And this other thing. Patient. Even. Not loud, not proud. It was like the clock in a room where you don't want to sleep: you don't think about it until you hear it, and then you hear only it.

"Light finger, short sweep to port," the officer finally commanded, and the crank sang its dry song. The click shot into my jaw. The lens rotated, the beam leaped across the black skin of the sea, leaving a bright scar, lingering briefly in one spot as if someone had bitten the light there, and gliding on. "Again," said the officer. "Shorter." Again the scar, again the sagging, this time just a breath, then the beam obeyed, as if it had been harnessed to a cart.

"Did you see that?" whispered the lens polisher, and the mechanic answered, loud enough that you could hear he didn't mean to whisper: "I didn't see anything." The men nearby did what you do when your head is fighting back: They talked about other things. About screws, about ankles, about a woman in another city who lies better than the sea. I listened and heard most of all what

they didn't say: that the light grew thinner when it went where no one rolled out maps.

Ned whistled softly, not a song, just his breath with an opinion. "Six more," he murmured. The bet crawled through the darkness like a cold worm and wrapped itself around everyone's neck. The officer acted as if he needed it to keep the men in line. In truth, the men were holding on to themselves, to things they didn't want to say: clean cuts, the smell of oil, a barrel that dived without asking.

I took the envelope out of my pocket—the thin one that smelled like all contracts: of damp cardboard and polite blackmail. "Instructions—confidential—to be opened on board only." I had refused to read it on the quay, perhaps out of superstition, perhaps out of spite. Now I ripped it open like a poorly wrapped apology. Inside were three sheets, neat, with the words of a man who never got wet. "Objective A: If a subaquatic anomaly is sighted, no unauthorized actions. No speculation toward the crew. Light control continuous, not pulsating. Maintain distance, stay course. Priority: Observe, record, report. If confirmed, technical origin: Mark with Type 3 light buoys, distance 200 yards, followed by pursuit at a safe distance. No salvage attempts without express authorization. Persons on board subaquatic anomalies are to be considered a danger. Acceptance only with the consent of consortium representatives." Below was a line that screamed louder than all the others: “In case of doubt – ramming is prohibited.”

I read it twice because the "forbidden" made my tongue stick. Who wrote "ramming prohibited" if they hadn't first "ramming considered"? I tucked the pages back as if they had teeth. Ned was suddenly standing next to me, as if he'd smelled the envelope. "What does the paperwork say?" he asked without looking. "That we remain polite," I said. "And that we should live so that others can decide." He nodded as if that were the nature of the world. "I've never been very polite," he grumbled, and went back to the bow, where his hand searched for the shaft like a dog searches for its old collar.

From the sick roll came the clang of metal, then Conseil's muffled "Damn it!" I went over, only three steps; the ship wasn't any wider. Inside, it smelled of iodine, linseed oil, and cold sweat. On the table was a sailor, his forehead cracked, his gaze as wide as the sea when he had nothing to do. "Slipping on the net," Conseil explained, the needle between his teeth, "more vanity than danger." He sewed with that patient malice that teaches wounds respect. "Do you hear it too?" asked the sailor, without moving his eyes. "That's knocking down there? So polite, as if it had time." "That's the engine," Conseil said

tonelessly. "Then tell the engine to stop," the man muttered. I went back outside because I didn't want to listen to the needle thinking.

Back at the post, the lens polisher stood rigid. "There!" he hissed, without raising his voice. I saw—and didn't see. At first there was only the blackness we call "water" when we mean well. Then, a handspan below the surface, a pale, flat glow appeared, like striking a match under a pane of glass. Not a round sparkle, not a fermenting carpet of algae. A line. A window without a house. The beam the officer now shone passed just over it, and I swore it thinned, as if something were drinking from it. The glow traveled two yards, stopped, traveled back, stopped again, as if it were listening. I felt my back listening.

"Beam away," the officer said sharply. The mechanic pulled back the crank, the clicking stopped, and right into that silence came a sound that stole our politeness: three short ones, two longer ones, three short ones. Not loud. Not demanding. Knocking against the hull, somewhere between the bow and midships, at the height where men begin to believe in things when they're not allowed to see. "Engine," the stoker said immediately, too quickly this time. "Expansion, material, acoustic—" - "Quiet," the officer cut in, and his voice was suddenly a knife that actually cuts.

We were silent. The knocking repeated itself, precisely, as if someone had poured water over our nerves and was now tugging at them to check where they were breaking. Ned stood with his legs apart, his harpoon low, without a float. "If you have eyes, show them," he murmured into the water. The water didn't respond. The glow beneath the surface faded, not slowly like things that tire, but quickly like things that decide. I found myself holding my breath, only finding it again when the click of the lens crept back into my jaw, as if it were suddenly a friend.

The officer gave orders that reeked of a manual. "No more lights than necessary. Double watches. Reports every five minutes. No private theories." I wrote nothing down, but still felt like I was on the record. The payboy scratched "Anomaly unconfirmed" in the logbook, as if he'd specifically practiced the word. His period at the end was small and cowardly. The mechanic pretended the axle needed attention and unwound something from it that looked like a thin strand of rope—a neat edge. "Wind," he said again. He sounded as if he'd personally insulted the wind.

In the light of the ship's lantern, I saw the bosun checking the knots on the bow net. His fingers ran over the weave like a blind man through a Bible. "If someone kisses the line, you bite back," he murmured, as if talking to the rope.

I didn't want to disturb him. Men have conversations with things when things are more reliable than people. Beside him stood the man rescued from the afternoon, pale, but whole. He held the railing as if it were a truth. "It pulled," he was no longer whispering, he said it as if bearing witness. The bosun didn't nod, didn't shake his head, he just pulled the line a fraction tighter, as if that were a way to hold back sentences.

The night went on as if it had time. A few drops of rain came and then decided to leave again. The machine hummed, and beneath it came that other, polite drone that didn't want sleep, only attention. I stared into the blackness until it formed patterns: the kind of patterns the mind invents to avoid admitting it doesn't know anything. The patterns became lines, the lines became paths, and I found myself imagining what it would be like if someone were actually sitting underneath, listening to us. Not with ears. On purpose.

"One more broom," the officer allowed, and the jet shot out again. Briefly, broadly, then narrowly, then broadly again. It grazed that spot, didn't get stuck, and kept going. As it drew back, I saw something I might later deny: a shadow too straight to be natural, too alive to remain mere iron. No body, no fin. More like a punctuation mark on the water, a hyphen between what we wanted to know and what we knew. The jet went out. I had the impression the darkness was smiling.

A cleat rattled somewhere to the right. The mechanic cursed quietly and bent over his sled. "Fiber again," he muttered, and I saw him pull out a tiny ribbon, thin as a child's hair, too neat, too tidy. "From the wind," he repeated, but even the lens seemed to grumble. I took the ribbon from him, rubbed it between my fingers. No salt. No anger. Just decision. I pocketed it because evidence tends to run away when it knows it's needed.

At the next half-glass, the lookout brought back a story like those born at sea: too young to be true, too old to seem a lie. "Lights," he said, "in a row. Like someone has windows underwater. But only when I'm not looking." The officer snorted. "Then don't look." We laughed because the alternative was silence, and silence feeds things you don't want to feed.

A gentle breeze blew around, just a whisper, bringing with it a smell I couldn't place: metal, yes, but not our metal. More like polished intent. I remembered the cover, the line "no ramming," and suddenly felt like a man who'd been told to be kind while someone slashed his pocket. Ned stepped back, rubbing his hand against the shaft without looking. "If it's a man," he said, "he's patient. If

it's a machine, the man is patient. In either case, they like us better if we talk. So we don't talk."

The bell was tired but reliable. It divided the night into sections, as if things became less real if you sliced them. With every half glass, the payboy wrote something down, and with every full glass, he acted as if he'd just learned something. Conseil briefly emerged from the sick roll, stretched his back, and looked at me without looking at me. "The wounds are asleep," he said. "The fear isn't." "I'll send her some coffee," I replied. He nodded, briefly placed his hand on the back of my neck, as if testing whether I still had a temperature, and disappeared again into the smell of iodine and lies.

The knock again: three short, two long, three short. Not demanding. Almost polite. The officer stood still, his whistle out of his mouth. For a moment, we had no boss, just a ship. Then he cleared his throat, as if he'd swallowed the hierarchy. "Not superstition," he said. "Engine noises. Tensions in the carrier." The stoker clapped his hands once—not in mockery, but in self-protection. "I'm tense, too," he muttered. "And no one's writing them down in the log."

The lens remained cold for the next hour; the darkness carried us like a cloak too heavy. I counted the ship's breaths, the way people used to count the footsteps on land to the door behind which someone was waiting. I counted cuts that shouldn't have happened. I counted how many times I heard "wind" when there wasn't any. I counted the notches on Ned's shaft, which grew small in the lantern light and large up close. And over and over I counted the same beat, which didn't come from us. Steady. Patient. As if someone who knew no effort was trying to teach us how to eat time.

Shortly before the change of watch, as the men grew tireder, as the coffee smelled weaker and the jokes grew harsher, a small, faint sound ripped through the night on the starboard side. Not a bang, not a break. More like the pop of a cork that was never there. I turned, the mechanic turned, the lens polisher stared. At the foot of the sled bed lay a length of rope—not one of our thick, honest ones, but a thin, foreign one, woven inward like a thought you can't shake. The end: clean. I picked it up, and the moment my fingers grasped the bundle of fibers, the wood vibrated beneath my feet. Once. Only briefly. As if someone below us had tapped the world with their knuckle, asking if anyone was home.

"All hands, quiet," said the officer, as if we were restless. We were silent. Ned stepped to the railing, leaned forward, the harpoon not high, not low, just right. "Show yourself," he didn't say. He thought it so loudly that I heard it.

Nothing showed itself. Only the polite drone remained, the rhythm that dislikes questions. The searchlight remained cold. The click remained in my teeth. The night remained. We remained in it, like letters that no one opens because the message has already been determined.

I put the strange, clean end in my pocket, next to the envelope, which now sounded useless. "No ramming," I whispered. "How reassuring." Conseil stepped beside me without taking a step. "You're talking to paper," he said. "That's a good sign. Bad signs are when paper talks to you." He looked at the water, where there was nothing, and nodded, as if he'd understood something he didn't want to tell me. Perhaps he wanted to say it and knew the night would keep it.

We held on until the next bell, not out of courage, just out of habit. Men are good at being accustomed to good habits on two legs, if no one pays them otherwise. When the relief shift shuffled across deck, their faces were new and ours were old. The officer tried to appear normal. "No incident," he dictated. The payboy wrote it down, this time making a big point. I would have liked to scratch it out of his notebook.

Then something else came that smacked of an incident: From the water, five or six yards from the bow, rose a narrow, straight breath, so quiet it was more imagination than sound. Not a whale, not a fish. More like the exhalation of a reed that doesn't need to breathe. A fine mist settled over the surface for a heartbeat. The officer inhaled. "Steam," he said, as if the word were a rescue. Ned exhaled. "Habit," he murmured. I wasn't breathing at all. And then the place was just water again.

"Changing of the guard," someone repeated, because repetition is a talisman. The men took turns, passing their tiredness into our hands and taking ours with them. I didn't move. My fingers played with the thin rope in my pocket, which felt as if someone had taught it manners. The polite drone remained. The night remained. We remained.

And somewhere out there—maybe five yards, maybe five hundred—something stopped counting us because it already knew how many of us there were.

The sick roll was a belly within a belly: warm, stuffy, full of the noises men make when they pretend to be machines. Iodine bit the air like a small, honest dog. Iron smelled of blood, even when none flowed. Conseil had his sleeves rolled up, his gaze short, his hands long. He arranged metal bowls on a board so crooked that even the truth slid across it. Needles lay there like arguments no

one wants to hear, threads like meek apologies. "Sit down," he said, and men who usually only accepted orders with ranks sat down.

The first one's forehead was like a ripped-open parcel—just a narrow cut, clean, almost polite. "Leash," he claimed, "slip in the dark." Conseil leaned forward, examining the wound as if reading the agenda. "Too clean for dew," he murmured. "Too straight for chance." He reached for the bowl and fished a thread from the water, thin, black, taut like a lie that had already rang true a few times. "What is this?" the man asked. "Our new kindness," Conseil said, and his needle went in, three stitches, four, the thread tightening like a thought that finally fits. The man bit down on a piece of wood, not growling because he was saving money.

The next man held his hand as if it were a bird he'd accidentally startled. A notch on the edge of his thumb, not deep, but it looked as if it was proud of its lack of teeth. "Headlight base," he said, "rubbed open." "Cut open," Conseil corrected quietly. He dabbed, sewed, cut thread; the thread obedient, the skin not. I held the lamp to him, and the light ran over skin and needle without warming. "Count me the glasses," Conseil said to the man. He started, lost the third, found it again. "Good," Conseil said. "If you count something later that isn't there, you'll come back."

Between two patients stood a tin cup of tea, pretending to be medicine. I drank it because you drink in rooms like this, or because you want to feel like you've accomplished something. Tea tasted of tin and order. Outside, the deck rumbled, the kind of noise that soothes as long as it stays. Below it, this other noise: a polite drone, the rhythm that doesn't ask if anyone is listening. I tried to think it away. It stayed, like debts stay when you sleep.

An old sea dog—his skin the archive of a long error—sat down on the box labeled "Bandages B" and lifted the hem of his shirt. Across his ribs: a line so clean it made me cold. No knife I know makes a line like that when it doesn't feel like making an impression. "Yesterday," he said, as if he had to justify it. "I got caught on the net." "Nets don't draw with a ruler," Conseil replied. "Did you feel it?" The man nodded. "Briefly. Like someone giving you a lesson with a wooden spoon." Conseil sewed, calmly, didn't talk about nets, didn't talk about men who go too close to the edge. He tied the knot, the skin accepted it like an order.

"You hear it too," I said, more a statement than a question. Conseil broke the thread, placed the needle on the plate, which responded with a thousand little taps. "I hear things so I don't have to hear people," he grumbled. "But that

thing out there—" He paused, as if listening to himself. "—that has patience. And patience isn't a property of water. Water has moods. Only people and things built by people have patience."

We were silent, but the silence didn't fill the room; it made it deeper. A young stoker came in, his face sooty, his eyes like two dots on a map. His lower lip was split, a small, neat scar that looked like it belonged somewhere with walls. "Have you been drinking punch?" Conseil asked. The stoker shook his head. "Just coffee." He said it with the shame of a man who knows that coffee sometimes lies worse than rum. Conseil mopped, sewed, mopped. "When you crawl over that sledge again tomorrow," he said, "keep your thoughts on dry land. They'll stay there anyway."

I took the envelope out of my pocket, the thin one with its polite threat, and discreetly placed it next to the bowl of needles. "What does it say?" Conseil asked without looking. "That we should remain polite," I said. "That we shouldn't ram anything we like. That we should throw flares two hundred yards apart, as if we were teaching an animal to cross a line." "Buoys are for things that stay still," he muttered. "That thing out there only stays still when it wants to listen to us."

The deck floor vibrated briefly, just once, as if someone below was giving a signal, not because they had to, but because they could. The lamp above us twitched, not much, enough for a shadow to circle the room once. "Is he knocking again?" asked the man with the forehead wound. "He," Conseil repeated dryly, as if practicing a new word. "No. He's just counting."

The officer poked his head in, pipe out, stem in his teeth, so he had something to cling to his sanctity. "Reports?" he asked. Conseil named numbers—two stitches, five stitches, a kick, a stupidity. I saw the officer weigh the words as if they were punishments. "And... other things?" he asked, the word distasteful to him. "Superstitions, noises, lights, figures?" Conseil tied a knot too tightly, untied it, retied it. "We're healthy," he said. "Yet." The officer nodded, as if he'd heard a correct answer. He left the room, leaving his shadow behind. It remained on the wall like a bad painting.

A boy was already standing in the doorway before it had fully closed. Twenty, maybe, maybe less, with the look of someone who is always waiting for someone to tell him how old he can be. He was holding something in his hand, wrapped in linen. "Pulled it out by the sled axle," he said, laying it on the table. Conseil grasped the fabric with tweezers, pulled it open. A bundle of fiber, thin as the nerves in a finger. The ends: smooth, smooth, smooth. No salt, no dirt.

"Wind," the boy said dutifully. "When the wind bites like that," Conseil replied, "it starts writing contracts." He pushed the bundle into a glass, poured spirit over it, screwed on the lid as if locking up a language no one should speak.

"Take it to the officer?" I asked. "He has enough to ignore," Conseil said. "We'll count our own cuts first before giving anyone the map." He wiped the table, and the iodine left a fleeting clarity, as if the room had learned to look straight ahead.

A sailor, who looked like a cupboard in the light, sat down like a lie and held his ankle as if grass had grown in it. "Just sprained," he claimed. Conseil pressed two fingers against a spot that causes men to invent the truth. The sailor swore, whole sentences, and that was good: someone who curses whole sentences is breathing properly. "No fracture," Conseil said, bandaged him up, and gave him a wooden splint that was exactly as uncomfortable as it needed to be. "If you run tonight, the sea will run with you. And it will win."

I stood for a while at the locker where the first aid kit was kept. On the top shelf, behind a gray blanket, was a small jar containing two pills that looked like absolution. Conseil pushed the crack shut without looking. "No," he said. "Later." - "For whom?" - "For whoever starts counting the wrong things first." He meant me. Or the officer. Or everyone.

Outside, a finger of light passed the hatch, a short stroke, like a knife merely greeting. Someone pushed a box down the corridor, and the wood sang across the planks. Then silence again, which wasn't empty, just demanding. I heard the clicking, under the gums, that little bureaucracy in my head. "Why the teeth?" I asked, more to myself. Conseil took off his gloves, threw them into a bowl that looked like a small lunar landscape. "Because lentils have teeth," he said. "And because our head is a box in which they lie. Sometimes they chew."

Ned poked his head in, big enough to make the room seem smaller. "Everything all right, Doctor?" he asked, and the word "Doctor" sounded like respect he could afford. "All bad," said Conseil, "and that makes it all right. You?" Ned shrugged. "He's here." - "He?" - "Whatever you're sewing is listening." He tapped the doorframe as if telling it to stop. Then he was gone again, his shadow with at least three more corners than necessary.

We received a visit from someone who wasn't injured but still wanted to be. He held his stomach, said he heard noises there. Conseil laid it down, pressed, listened, and his stomach played the machine for us: a clean beat, well-behaved, slightly offended. "Nothing," said Conseil. "Just anxiety with rhythm."

- "My wife says I don't have a heart," the man murmured. - "Then the sea will lend you one," Conseil replied. "But give it back." He pressed a bag filled with warm salt into his hand. "Put it on, think, breathe. Don't listen when it knocks."

I took the spirit glass with the bundle of fibers and held it up to the lamp. The light revealed that the threads weren't round, but rather flat, almost like ribbons someone would later turn into knitting. "Tool," I said. Conseil nodded. "Or habit." "Habits don't cut it." "Yes, they do," he said. "The best ones. Silent."

A scream from outside. Nothing loud, no alarm. Just the sound of a man suddenly no longer caring about another's balance. We rushed out, Conseil wiping his hands on his coat as if going to a dance. On deck: two men, not fighting, but trying not to fall. One slipped on the damp plank, holding the railing, the railing holding him, the knot holding the railing. It was a small, ugly dance that had nothing to tell. We were quick enough to end it before it became a story. As we breathed, the air smelled of metal again. Someone whispered "steam," someone "oil," and I thought "intent."

Back in the sick role, it was brighter, as if the iodine had decided to comfort us. Conseil washed his hands more slowly, as if he were talking to them. "You'll write it down," he said without looking up. "Not today, not tomorrow. But you will. And you'll write the wrong thing first, because the wrong thing is nicer." "I'm not writing anything," I lied. He smiled, without a smile, and placed a needle in my hand. "Then at least hold on to something."

The officer came back, saw the glass with the fibers, and did what men do when evidence is small: He politely ignored it. "Soon to be dusk," he said. "We're holding course, no games. And—" He searched for a word that wouldn't betray him. "—no stories." Conseil nodded as if he'd been forbidden to sterilize the sun. "Yes, sir," he said, tying a new patient's hand, too tight to make him scream, and just right to keep him from screaming later.

As the officer left, I turned the glass in my hand, feeling the weight that wasn't real. "No ramming," I repeated to myself, and it sounded like a joke from another city. The machine hummed, the other noises settled over it like blankets that don't warm. The tea was cold. I drank it anyway. Cold keeps you awake until fear takes over.

A last man came in, wordless, sat down, and placed his hands on his knees. No cuts, no blood, just eyes that had seen too much night. "What's wrong?" asked Conseil. The man looked at the lamp, at the needle, at the glass containing the threads. "Nothing," he said. "Just me." Conseil nodded, as if that were the most

common wound. He gave him a piece of bread, dry, honest. Sometimes chewing is the only stitch that holds.

Outside, the bell was half-truthful. The night wasn't over, but it pretended to be. The polite drone below us remained friendly, like a neighbor who always waters his flowers while you're asleep. I stuffed the envelope back into my pocket and the glass jar into a small cabinet that rattled when the ship breathed. "If you meet him," Conseil said, without my asking, "don't ask good questions. Good questions make answers grow. We don't have room for greenhouses here."

I nodded, stood, and remained standing. It was cooler in the hallway; the air tasted less of iodine and more of anticipation. Planks creaked above me; a thin, damp thread ran across the floor in front of me—not water, just condensation, pretending to be a trail. I stepped over it, pretending I wasn't superstitious. Bowls clanged behind me; a bulkhead creaked in front of me; somewhere, the night counted to three, waiting for us to join in.

I went out onto the deck. The lenses were still under cloth, the watch had changed, faces you liked just because they were there. Ned at the bow, shoulders that never freeze, even when the wind lies. He saw me, looked away; that was his greeting. I put my hand on the side of the ship. It vibrated. Cleanly. Patiently. I suddenly had the feeling that the thing down there already knew our names—our first names, our nicknames, the names we want to forget. I took my hand away, put it in my pocket, and the fiber in the glass in the sick roll itched in my head like a thought that shouldn't be scratched.

"Come to sleep," Conseil said later, as I stood in front of his belly again. "Sleep is the only anesthesia that doesn't require a prescription." "If I fall asleep," I said, "he'll count me out." "Then count back," Conseil said. "Silently." He extinguished the lamp, and the sick roll turned black except for the glow of the embers in a tin stove pretending to win against the sea.

The night remained, polite, watchful, unmoved. We stayed inside, like threads beneath a skin that wasn't ours. And somewhere beneath the keel, very near and very far, someone was practicing knocking again—not louder, just more confidently. Three short, two long, three short. As if he wanted to teach us how to forgo answers.

Towards the end of the night, the cold became personal. It placed its hand on our necks, checked our pulses, and decided we were still fit to stay awake. The deck was slippery with breath and spray, the planks talking in their knees as if

they had an opinion on our decisions. The lamps were shrouded, only at the edges a dull silver rim seeped through the cloth, like light that is ashamed. The officer put away his pipe, perhaps to conceal the chattering of his teeth. "Hold on," he said to the air. Air never answers such sentences.

I stood at the bulwarks, the taste of cold tea and iodine in my mouth, listening to the machine that didn't speak at all. Beneath its humming sat that other thing again: the polite drone, steady, patient, without ambition. It acted as if it were counting us, and I don't know if it reassured me that someone in the world was keeping track. The lens polisher squatted next to me, his hands tucked under his thighs to hide his youth. "Sometimes," he whispered, "it sounds like someone is laughing. Deeply, but without teeth." "Close your ears," I said. "The laughter never belongs to us."

From the bow came the faint metalwork of the harpoon. No bragging, just checking: checking the shaft, checking the latch, feeling the string as if it had a pulse. Ned stood, as always, where the deck begins to translate fear toward the water. He didn't look over, didn't have to. "Five more," he muttered to the sea. Five days, five nights, five reasons not to drink too much. The bet hung in our stomachs like knots you don't want to untie, thinking your fingers would get sore.

A soft cry from the lookout, not an alarm, just one that briefly deflected the night wind. "Breath," he called, "starboard, four yards, maybe less." Breath. The word had to get used to us. Not the blowing of an animal, not loud, warm life. More like a fine mist that momentarily mattified the surface of the water, as if someone beneath it were carrying a cold glass to the surface. "No light," the officer ordered, perhaps on principle, perhaps because he had gritted his teeth. We stared into the spot until it was just water again. Water has this courtesy: it quickly extinguishes what it doesn't want to keep.

The watch at the bow changed silently. The man rescued from the afternoon insisted on taking his post, his fingers wrapped around the net as if he could hold the ship where it ended. I approached him. "Are you sleeping later?" "I was already asleep," he murmured, "halfway down." He wasn't joking. He'll laugh later, I thought. Later is a common phrase.

Halfway across the deck, the mechanic knelt at the base of the searchlight, acting as if a screw were the world. I heard it before I saw it: that small, reliable click you feel in your gums when the crank moves even a fraction. It was missing for a second, returned, missing again, returned again—like a heart stumbling for attention. “Axle?” I asked. He shook his head. “Not the axle.” He

pulled something out from under the bearing with tweezers. Thin. Black. Clean. “Again.” He wrapped it around his finger, and the ribbon fell into place, obediently, as if it knew who it belonged to. “From the wind,” he repeated dutifully, looking past me. We were both tired of this wind.

The sea gave the hull a slight sideways movement, as if someone were pushing it with their foot. Nothing to talk about—just enough to make the pocketknives in the men's coats clink quietly together. The officer raised his hand, the bridge diverted a point from its course, and for three breaths the sky was offended that it wasn't allowed to guide us. "Engine?" the stoker asked aft, because sometimes questions are only there to stop you thinking for yourself. "Engine is engine," came the reply, frosty as a windowpane. I put my hand to the wood. It vibrated cleanly. Beneath it vibrated something that wasn't our idea.

For a while, nothing worth writing down happened. Men counted glasses, moods, their own fingers. The counting clerk wrote "no incident" in handwriting that looked as if it knew it wasn't true. Conseil came up briefly, the tiredness smoothed from his face. "Sleeping," he said, meaning no one is dying right now. "You?" - "I'm counting sounds," I replied. "How many?" - "Enough for a book." - "We're not writing one," he said, which was consolation in his language, and disappeared back into his belly within his belly.

Then we found it: no tear, no crash, no deaths. A knot. At knee height, inside the bulwarks, where no one looks because their gaze always wants to go out. Looped around the pole: a ring made of exactly the fine, clean fiber the mechanic had begun to collect. Not clamped, not glued. Tied. A small, cheeky decorative knot, so neat any boatswain could have signed it. The boatswain looked at it as if he had to choose between admiration and hatred. "This is art," he said, and his voice sounded as if he were sick. "And art has no purpose here."

"Who has—" the officer began. No one answered because no one had seen anything. We all should have seen it if it had been one of us. If only, if only. I stroked the fiber tape; it felt like a lie, proud of itself. The mechanic carefully lifted the knot without untying it and placed it in his tin tray. "Proof," he murmured, as if trying to relearn the term. The officer nodded curtly. "Lock it away." He meant: forget it later.

"It's listening," said Ned from the bow without turning around. That was all. It didn't need anything else. The men nearby did what men do when they start believing things they're not allowed to believe at night: They worked harder and talked less. The lens polisher stood up, walked to the sled, and put his hand

on the crank, just to be sure he could still move something that could be moved.

Shortly thereafter, the lookout brought a new tale. "Lights," he said, "not a line, today a bow. As if..." He searched for an honest metaphor and found only poor ones. "...as if someone were smiling." I heard more fever than information in the word. The officer raised his eyes as if accepting a bill he later wouldn't pay. "No light," he repeated, and the night did him the favor of pretending it had the last word.

It grew colder, without identifying itself with the air. The water took on that leaden skin in which no stars are reflected, even when they are there. Then, toward the hour that one no longer wants to call night and cannot yet call morning, the officer asked for the "short broom." A hint of a jet, nothing for the stories. The mechanic pulled off the cloths, the lens polisher put his hand to the crank, the click leaped into my jaw, faithful as guilt. The finger of light probed out, just above the surface, a line no thicker than an excuse. It traced the spot where the breath had been, hesitated—a moment longer than politeness—and I swore it thinned again, as if something were soaking in it, patient, disciplined, as if it were testing how much light we had left.

"Enough," the officer said too quickly. The beam went out, and into the small darkness below us, there was a clanging sound: clang-clang-clang, clang—clang, clang-clang-clang. The same sequence. The same tone. Not a demand, just a reminder. Ned held the harpoon as if it had just held its breath. No one moved, because everyone knew that any movement in such seconds is an agreement one does not want to give. "Machine," the stoker tried again, this time without conviction. "A machine is a machine," no one answered.

The wind shifted, barely, and brought with it a breath that didn't belong to us: that bare, sterile metal that doesn't rust because it's not allowed to. I opened my hand and realized I'd been clenching it into a fist the whole time. In my fist lay something small I didn't remember picking up: a brass pin, no longer than a finger joint, smooth, with a tiny notch—exactly the kind of pin that holds the safety catch on Type 3 light buoys. I looked at it as if it were an insulting gesture. "You touched the buoys?" I wondered aloud. "No," I didn't answer myself. I put the pin away. Conseil would put it in a glass. The officer wouldn't see it. And whoever counted as polite among us knew where it came from anyway.

"Hold course," commanded the bridge, politely, as one asks a dog not to chase its shadow. The helmsman corrected, the rudder responded, all officially.

Unofficially, something beneath us slipped sideways, leisurely like a thought one doesn't want to voice right away. The bosun tightened the net a fraction, the rescued man stiffened his fingers, the lens polisher whispered something that might have been a prayer, and perhaps just his mother's name.

And then, so quietly that no one wanted it to happen, something broke again. Nothing big, nothing dramatic. A small, clean break in a line someone had hung over a cleat to dry. No danger, just a warning. The boatswain got there first, cursed elegantly, held the end up. The cut grinned at us, politely, well-mannered. "How do you do something like that in the dark, with no witnesses?" asked the lens polisher, holding his hand over the wood as if seeking warmth. "By practicing," said the mechanic, and I didn't know if he meant us or the other one.

Behind the starboard rail, the oil film parted one last time, two tongues that moved only for us and then acted as if they'd never known us. "Broom out," ordered the officer, though the jet had long since cooled. His voice had the tone of someone who wants to believe their own paper. The paymaster wrote "routine" on a line that bristled. Conseil stepped up beside me without making the sound footsteps usually make. "Dusk," he said, as if delivering a diagnosis. "Then they like to sleep. Or they're coming closer because they think we're blind."

The sky discreetly dissolved its contract with the night. First, the black took on a dirty edge, then the edges of things were reinvented. The water lay there like lead that longed to be silk. Seagulls didn't fly; they hung there because there were no stories to be had yet. The machine hummed in its respectable tone, and beneath it, the other knocked again—not louder, just more decisive. I felt it more than I heard it: in the wood, in the moldings, in the part of the gums that knew about yesterday.

"Change of guard," called the bell. Men were peeling off like labels that have been changed too often. The new faces looked old, the old ones new. The officer did what officers do in the morning: He brushed his uniform, even though the night hadn't dirty it. "No incident," he dictated to the payboy. The payboy scratched out the word, rubbing the ink with the heel of his hand until it looked as if someone had tried to change it to "precaution."

Ned stayed at the bow, his harpoon loose. He didn't smile, but his shoulders slumped a little as the first pale streak of light painted the edge of the sea. "Four more," he said. Then he looked briefly at me, as if he'd forgotten that other eyes existed, and recalled the memory. "Today will be more honest," he

murmured. "Twilight makes liars lazy." - "Or diligent," I said. "Depends on who's paying for the lie."

I opened my hand, which no longer contained a brass pin, and rubbed away the imprint that wasn't one. In my pocket, I felt the thin bundle of fibers that didn't decide whether to be thread or evidence. Behind us, the sick roll slept briefly; in front of us, the water acted as if there were only depth and no interest. The polite drone remained, as if we were the clock and it was the space.

The day came, but it came with a face that promised nothing. That was the best he could do. We redeployed, doing what men do when they realize the night hasn't killed them: we gave hope the form of work. The mechanic placed the decorative knot in a glass, the boatswain checked knots that refused comfort, the lens polisher polished even though the lenses were clean enough, the payroll clerk added courage. Conseil mentally reviewed the stitches and came up with zero fresh deaths. Ned stroked a notch on the shaft, neither new nor old. I rearranged the brass plate in my pocket, as if that could upset the world's priorities, and vowed to reread what the polite instructions required of us. "No ramming," it read, and the sentence smiled, as if it knew more about us than we did ourselves.

The wind increased, the sea remained calm. A day such as ships love and stories hate. But somewhere beneath, not far, not near, someone continued to tap the same polite rhythm, not asking if we were ready. And we, with rum in our veins, steel in our hands, lists in our heads, and courage on credit, held our course—politely like debtors who have chosen to deliver the bill in person.

Harpoons, curses and vomit

We loaded the small wars, which are made of iron. Stems, tips, lines—everything lay ready, as if we were planning to teach the sea manners. The corridor smelled of iodine, spirit, rum, and that aggressive hope that men get just before they do something stupid. The lamps—our glass teeth—pushed their lips together. The plate did its business.*ttk*: Lights up, work +1, air -1/2. "Look, work hard, breathe less"—that's what it said in steel. The warm hole in the side of the ship pounded 3-2-3 like a baton that doesn't ask us anything.

Ned held a harpoon as if it were an answer. "If something breathes, it gets a name," he growled. Conseil's hands were already bloody from preparing, clean

blood, the clinical red of orderly hell. He checked lines, knots, clasps—accountants under pressure. "Fiber: open/half/closed," he muttered, "and no one ties it backward, okay?" No one laughed. One vomited into the bucket as if it were the national anthem of the deep. Spirit on gauze, gauze on muzzle—the liturgy took its place. "Long—long—short," Conseil counted over the ribs of the seasick so they wouldn't fall between our lines. The plate nodded: work to go +½, as if only those who are half dead should toil. Nemo stood silently above everything, helmet on his neck, glove over the pulpit like a silent law—a priest without God, but with electricity.

The hull hummed softly, the propellers murmured, the men liked to look into the blackness as long as it stayed in the window. I put my hand to the bulkhead: cold, honest, indecently reassuring. And then the first little, ugly trick happened: a drop of oil broke loose from the collar of the lamp, didn't fall, floated sideways in the light, and stopped on an edge, as if the world were lying half a degree uphill at that very spot. Nothing fell. We didn't grin. We cast at shadows, because shadows at least behave. The first train came over an edge in the blackness; Ned rammed, the stem sang, and the line shot out of the tub, fast as a lie. "Halt!" gasped Conseil, "Tension, angle, hands off!" Too late for decorum. The plate whipped up light, work +1, air -½; the glass teeth hardened like police lights. The belly stood at attention.

The leash ripped through the aisle, brushed against boots, prayed against bells, until it found a love: on the frame, right where the viewing window nestles against us. I saw it too late—at the neck of the leash, a bundle of fibers, small, neat, looped in backwards, edge inward, against my hand. "Who has..." Conseil began, and swallowed it like poison. Nemo didn't point. He let work increase even further—we should be sweating instead of thinking.

Ned cursed, the hook worked, the men shouted in languages found only in salt. I held the lamp until my arms ached; in the glass, first courage flickered, then dirt. The line swept along the rubber lip, leaving no trace—only the smell. Iron, fresh. The window suddenly smelled like a razor blade.

A drop of red came from nowhere for no reason at all—a splash from the glove or the hook, it didn't matter—found the frame and did what red shouldn't do: It crawled sideways. Not down, not out, not neatly into the joint—it took the wrong path, tested an invisible groove, and hung there as if someone had whispered "this way" to it.

The procession became serious. Somewhere outside, something hung there

that didn't like us. The torso sang, a tone that sawed at the nerves. Men fell silent, the vomiters vomited in time. Conseil stuffed gauze into their ears, dripped real alcohol on them, and distributed cloths like communion wafers in a church that God had canceled. "Steam," he hissed, "The brain only lasts when it can't hear anything." The gut agreed: 3-2-3, patient as a bad marriage.

Ned stood with his legs wide apart over the tub, hands on the leash, teeth bared. "Pull, you dog," he growled against the black. The slab was only making small blows, light narrow, work up high, air cheap. I tapped short—short—long on the pipe, not out of faith, but out of habit; the warm hole answered politely, 3-2-3. The leash whimpered back, as if it knew what our ribs already knew.

The men in the corridor became hinges: one held, one spat, one prayed with clenched teeth. Condensation stood on the bulkhead, as if someone had forgotten to wipe it away. Two drops collided, writing an N on the cold film, next to it an A—crooked, mirrored, defiant—and dissolved upwards beneath the slat, clean as a signature not meant for us.

The pull ripped again, deeper, heavier. I smelled cold, not fish. The glass teeth burned white until the whiteness hurt. "Enough," no one said, and everyone heard. The mistake came from within. A second line, poorly laid, leaped from the tub, kissed a forearm, and left behind a neat, narrow truth. Not deep, just honest. Blood on gloves, on handle, on tile. "Pressure!" Conseil yelled, and there was gauze on it, and iodine burned as holy as only pain can. The man breathed in debt.

Someone grabbed the rag on the hook, too quickly, too obediently. Ned banged the bucket, water splashed, guilt splashed over his shoes. "Not another hero," he said without a smile. I saw the rag, I saw the ring: the bundle of fibers backward, knotted against the hand, neat as if by design. "Later," Conseil growled, "now the arm." He tied correctly, open, tight, and his gaze marked the wrong knot on his tongue.

The plate acted like a pulpit servant: full light, +1 work, air was scarce—courtroom in the cauldron corridor. Nemo stood a foot away, glove over the pulpit, and that's precisely why it obeyed. I placed the spirit glass next to the tub; the sooty spangles turned 3-2-3 and stood sideways for a beat, as if to say: Truth has two sides today. The wounded man bit gauze, cursed, lived. Ned held the handle as if he could sew the world itself together. And then the pulpit performed its indecent trick:*ttk.*A quiet click without gloves, a millimeter of work -½, as if the boat had understood that we must not die right now because

the story needs it.

It tore one last time, then stopped altogether: the line slackened, the shadows disappeared, only the smell remained. We stood there and held on, because hands sometimes take longer than brains. "Abort," no one said, and the plate behaved itself: lights down, work -1, air +1/2. His stomach breathed like a judge who's off duty. Nemo didn't look at us, or into the glass—just past the rim, as if he'd already booked the rest.

On the frame, that thin, cheeky red remained, which had just joined itself sideways. Conseil pressed spirit into the rubber lip, sealing the seam so neatly that it smelled of shame. Ned held the bucket, not letting him speak. "The trace remains," he said, "we're not finished with the truth yet." The wounded man's arm was held, his teeth too.

I wiped the sweat from my eyes, looked up, and saw the old fairy tale reappear in water: N, A, small, defiant, mirror-inverted. The letters detached themselves from the bulkhead, slid upwards beneath the slat like two dates. The warm hole throbbed 3-2-3, and the third blow lingered high beneath my sternum, as if it were driving the yes into my ribs.

Nemo didn't turn around, he placed a comma: glove over the pulpit, no click. The glass teeth became tame like tired dogs. We cleaned up, but not neatly: the wrong band remained hanging, a small tooth in memory; the lines lay as if they were trying to tell the window a dream. And outside in the darkness, just beyond the cone, I felt something standing that didn't have to wait. The rest is familiar: later, there are circles, glances, laughter—and the pane remembers what we've fed here.

Encounter with a monster – or just too much rum?

The cold suddenly had manners. It no longer came as a weather forecaster, but as an inspector, placed its hand on the back of my neck, calmly counted how many times I swallowed, and then decided there was still room for improvement in terms of discomfort. The sky hung just above the mast, a wet felt that swallows sound, and the sea was a flat, flat as a poor excuse. We stood in our places as if we'd always lived there: men as fixtures, breath as condensation that had no right to be visible, yet was.

The lamps were tamed with cloths, the searchlight lay like a large dog on its sled, head down, eyes closed, but everyone knew how quickly that could tip over. The officer was suddenly very orderly, but he always was when he didn't know what to do with his hands. The pipe stayed in his pocket. A sign. If he didn't need the wood between his teeth to hold his words, there was a danger that the words would slip away.

"Hold on," he said. That one phrase people use when the list of other phrases has slipped through their fingers. No one answered. Not even the air.

The lookout turned his head so slowly, as if it had hinges made of tar, and then raised a hand. No drama. Just that purposeful tone that fits between neck and deck. "Breath," he said. The word had the wrong temperature. "Starboard, close."

We looked there the way one looks down a dark corridor, one that one has walked a thousand times, yet each time hopes it's shorter today. There was nothing but water. And then there was this nothingness that was different: a dull, cold veil on the surface of the sea, no bubbles, no animal impression, just a thin mist that breathed for a second and immediately forgot that it wanted to live. No sound accompanied it. That made it worse.

"No light," the officer said mechanically, and the mechanic confirmed silently by demonstratively removing his hand from the crank. The cloth over the lens remained cloth. In the silence, a cleat didn't rattle, a cup didn't rattle, a tooth didn't rattle—until the old, polite humming from below sounded again, as if it knew what it was supposed to do.

Conseil emerged from the sick role like the thought of "reason" in a bar. He carried the lamp, the short one with the covered shade, and his face was the map of people who sleep little but think clearly. "Nobody's drinking anything that burns more than tea these days," he said to the group, not aloud, just so it stuck in their ears. "Rows."

He placed us in two semicircles, like freshly washed sins. Strength, pupils, gaze. He shone the lamp not into the sea, but into eyes. No sermon, just work. "Follow my finger," he said, and his finger was an instrument. Men who had pretended for hours that they weren't cold followed that finger with a longing that was almost comical. "Stick out your tongue," to the stoker. "Walk line," to one who claimed he was never drunk, only enthusiastic. A walk line on a ship is a joke, but Conseil allows jokes if they help. The man managed four steps,

which the ship wouldn't grant him, and stopped before the ridiculousness piled him up.

"You're lucid," Conseil said to me, so matter-of-factly that for a moment I felt caught out, as if I'd tried to convince him. "Not awake, but lucid." He sniffed my breath, professional as a baker finding yeast defects. "Tea. Iodine. Metal. No rum." "I'll save the lying for later," I said. He nodded. It was the kind of agreement that's as hard as a bandage.

The officer, who wore his need for control like a cloak no one envied, approached. "Condition of the men?" "Fit for duty," Conseil replied. "And if someone sees something, the probability that they saw it is greater than usual." The officer twisted the corners of his mouth as if he'd caught a cramp. "Superstition isn't a diagnosis." "No," Conseil replied, "but both have consequences."

The polite rumble beneath us, which we'd long since relegated to the same part of our brains as tinnitus and guilt, was back, precise, patient. I placed my fingertip against the bulwark. A clean, steady pulse. Not ours. Someone moved behind me, and the wood responded with a crack that sounded as ancient as the invention of ships.

The lookout still had his hand in the air, as if telling a teacher he'd solved the problem. "There was breath," he repeated hesitantly, as if he were bothering us. "Without... well... without an animal." "The sea doesn't breathe," said the officer. "It only pretends to." A sentence that tried to be clever, but went in the wrong direction.

From the shadows of the bow came the small, polite conversation of metal with metal. No pageantry. The harpoon in Ned's hands was receiving the stern encouragement of a man who knows all about why things don't do what they're supposed to at the wrong time. He cares for steel as if it were animals that respond to affection, but only when no one is looking. "Five to go," he muttered to himself—his silent watch for the bet, hanging above the deck like a second moon. I pretended I hadn't heard. Bets are like toothaches: you leave them alone, or they drive you to stupidity.

"Do you hear it?" asked Conseil. I heard it. That knocking that doesn't knock because it doesn't require a fist. Three short, two long, three short. Not loud, not demanding. A polite reminder—as if someone down there were taking our measurements. "Tensions in the beam," the stoker threw into the room, predictable as a calculation. "Temperature, material is moving." - "Material

isn't moving in time," said Conseil. "People are." - "Or machines," I added, and the officer inserted his shadow between them. "Machines work according to our rules," he lectured his own wood. "Ours does what I tell it." The stoker coughed that laugh that scrapes the pitch out of your lungs. "If it hears you," he murmured.

The watch changed, and the scraping of the bell turned the night into hackable pieces. The new faces looked as if the night had lifted the lid and sprinkled salt in their eyes. The man rescued from the previous day—the man who had tried the railing one too many times—insisted on going to the bow. He felt the net like a mother feels the forehead of a feverish child. "It's holding," he said, although no one had asked. "It's holding better than I am." "Then you hold on to the hold," Conseil advised him. "And when it lets go, you let go. Dead are those who want to be right."

In the glow of the veiled lanterns, the small economies of truth emerged. A cup was passed around, and you could smell it, revealing that it was more harmless than its reputation. Tea. Cheap. Honest, because it promised nothing. I warmed my hands on it, and the metal brought back a memory I hadn't ordered: for half a breath, it smelled of something shiny, clean, that shouldn't rust. Foreign metal smells like a dentist's office. You know immediately that no one's having fun.

The mechanic knelt at the base of the headlight, not because he was ordered to, but because hands that can care for something offer care against fear. He slid his fingers to the spindle without moving them and looked at me before I could find a question. "If I just tap the crank," he said almost tenderly, "the click jumps into your jaw. Yes?" "Yes," I said. "Then I won't tap." And he didn't tap. Nice of him.

I pulled the envelope from my coat pocket. It was thin, like an apology that arrives too late. I'd last torn it open by the lamplight in the sick roll, and since then it felt different—heavier, because thoughts can fake weight if they're stacked poorly. "No ramming," it read. "Set buoys, keep your distance." While I was just weighing it this time between my fingers and the weather, somewhere the bell continued to count a half-truth.

"If it were an animal," the lens polisher said abruptly, "it would have to take a breath, wouldn't it?" "It was breathing," retorted the lookout, insulted that his observation should have been made so easy. "Without a sound," I insisted. "And without any warm intention." "Fish have no intentions," growled the boatswain, checking a knot for the fourth time that refused comfort. "Humans

underwater certainly don't." "Then all we have left," said Conseil, "is for someone who doesn't need air to pretend they do, because they've learned that that calms us down."

The officer wanted to bring the conversation back to rules, but the night had better moderation. She left us standing, each in our place, each with our own little bell in our heads. The mechanic placed a cloth over the lens, as if wrapping a child who must not be woken. The polite drone remained, that quiet authority from the depths, demanding respect without being loud.

Again, three short, two long, three short. This time closer to midship. The stoker made a noise you only make when you hear yourself contradicting yourself and realize the word "engine" no longer fits. "Oarman working," the officer said bravely, and the rudder remained as still as it could be. Ned didn't move the harpoon, but the muscles in his forearms wrote a sentence I couldn't yet read.

Dusk set foot over the rampart without asking. No color came with it. Only that dirty light that reinvents the edges of things so you can be proud of having known them all. I smelled iodine, yesterday's chlorine, cold iron that always tastes of lies, and that other smell that hung in the air, as if someone had opened a polish and closed it again before the name was visible.

"I want to see your hands," Conseil said, and it didn't sound like authority, but rather like experience. We held them out. He didn't check for scratches and calluses. He looked for tremors that didn't come from the ship and for warmth that you can't drink. He tapped joints, counted fingernails, smelled skin—in short, routinely. "If you're awake, stay awake," he ordered. "If you think you're awake, walk up and down for ten minutes. Don't speak. Don't count. Only kick if the board rocks." We obeyed him, not the officer. The officer acted as if it had been his idea, and maybe that was even nice of him.

We'd barely found a rhythm without meaning when the lookout reported "breathing" a second time. This time the word died in his throat. The officer raised his hand and then let it fall again without finding an order. "No light," he finally said, to himself, to us, to anything that would listen. The searchlight continued to lie there like a reliable traitor, and I suddenly knew for sure that later the lens wouldn't be as cold as it was now.

The rescued man at the bow smoothed the net from below, checking for knots by feel. "If it pulls, I'll pull back," he murmured. "If it saws, I'll scream." "Don't scream," the boatswain said gently, without irony. "Just report it." He had

stopped saying "wind" when he saw fibers, and that was his way of admitting guilt.

"Listen," Ned said. It sounded as if he were forbidding us to do anything else. We listened. The knock didn't come. There was a pause longer than politeness. And then, instead of the wood, it came from somewhere else: three short, two long, three short—from the tin cup in my hand. No echo. No wind chime. The cup vibrated, just a faint, as if someone had poked it with a fingernail from outside. I put it down, very slowly, so I wouldn't think I'd dropped it. The cup didn't roll. It stayed there, completely still, as if it knew we were now judging its character.

"That's enough," someone whispered. "For what?" asked the stoker, and no one had a word to fill the gap. Conseil took the cup from me, smelled it as if it contained a medicine with a name. "Tea," he said. "And some metal that has suppressed its scent." He set the cup down, and it went clop-clop-clop, clop—clop, clop-clop-clop, not from the cup, not from the wood, not from the air. From me. Very faintly, behind the incisors, in the jawbone that has served as a telephone for lenses for days. I felt it, not strongly, but surely. Three, two, three.

I didn't smile. That required a different kind of humor. Ned raised the harpoon an inch, just to test it, and let it sink again. The officer took a breath as if it were new. The sky acted as if it were considering whether it really wanted to be bright today. And somewhere below us, very politely and very patiently, something was waiting to see if we would return the salute. I raised my hand, not to wave. Just so it would do something that wasn't trembling. The cup stood in front of me as if nothing had happened. My teeth counted to three, two, three. After that, they held their breath.

The morning had no face yet, but it already had rules. The officer dropped the protocol from his mouth like bricks. "Marking according to regulations. Type three light buoys. Distance: two hundred yards. Hold course. No light without orders." He paused, like a birthmark—a mistake he couldn't laser away. "Ramming remains..." He swallowed the word, cleared his throat. "Forbidden." No one laughed. We'd given up laughing since the water began to tap politely.

The bosun and I retrieved the box. Wooden, screwed together, the corners still salt-scarred from earlier courtesies. He lifted the lid, and inside the box, the buoys stared at us like half-asleep eyes: sheet metal bodies, varnished, brass fittings, locking pins in a felt compartment—in theory. In practice, there was a gaping hole there. The bosun counted, his lips grumbling. "Eight pins." He

looked at me as if I were the ninth. I searched my coat pocket for the pin I'd found in my fist last night. It was there, smooth, cool, offended. I placed it in the felt compartment, and for a split moment, the box seemed complete—only to immediately feel incomplete again. "One more missing," grumbled the bosun. "We're not improvising. Not today."

The officer stood behind us as if offering commentary. "Inventory?" "Nine," said the boatswain. "Ten listed." "Then we'll list nine," the officer decreed. That was his way of fixing the world: adjusting paper, not things. He gestured toward the railing. "Loosen."

We heaved the first buoy overboard. It took to the water like a dog that knows its name: a quick dip, a shake, then a lift. The second followed, then the third. Ned at the bow counted the distance by eye, which was more accurate than any number. "Two hundred yards," he murmured, "two hundred reasons not to rush things." The stoker held the rope as if heat could teach the current. On deck, the mechanic walked beside the searchlight, his hand so close to the handle that my teeth itched.

The buoys didn't drift the way things drift when left to their own devices. They slid, jerked, made small adjustments, as if adding more weight where our eyes were deceiving us. "Current," the officer said reflexively. "Cross-haul." The bosun nodded, because it's not every day that you can spit on the deck against the obvious. He tugged on a line that was tied to the stern, and the buoy obediently moved back a yard—only to slide back into the line it wanted shortly thereafter. I looked at the compass. He wasn't being fussy, but he was pretending to be bored.

"Two more," ordered the officer. The lens polisher stood nearby, as if for the first time in his life he were working on a device without a lens. He watched the buoys make their own little decisions and swallowed. "They..." He trailed off. "They're orderly." "Order is not a crime," said the officer. The boatswain and I exchanged glances that said order is sometimes worse.

The line finally stood outside, like a line drawn under a calculation one doesn't want to be correct. Not a perfect line. A corridor. There was extra space between buoys four and five; the current demanded it. It seemed like an invitation. Ned leaned against the bulwark, looking out as if he were sharpening his knife in his head. "If he has manners," he said, "he'll take the corridor." His hand rested casually on the shaft of the harpoon, and this casualness was the opposite.

"Short broom," called the bridge. The mechanic put his hand to the crank, the click jumping into my jaw, short, clean, matter-of-fact. The jet shot out, flat across the surface of the water, as if it didn't want to disturb. Then, between four and five, it became thin. Not tilting, not flickering. Thin, as if someone were drinking light with decency. "Go on," said the officer, and the lens obeyed, but reluctantly. When the jet dissipated, a pale residue remained beneath the surface for a heartbeat, like a window without a house. Then there was just water again, insulted in its perfection.

“Wind,” no one said.

As he was retracting the searchlight, the mechanic slid his hand under the bearing, cursed so quietly that only people with problems heard, and pulled something out. A thin ribbon, black, flat, not broken, not tired. It was tied in a small, neat knot. Not a random knot, not a rushed "Hold on." A greeting. He held it between his tweezers and his breath, as if it were a mosquito that bites on principle. "What did I say?" muttered the bosun. "Art without commission." The mechanic placed the knot in his tin bowl, and the metal sounded as if someone had laughed at us.

Conseil came over, looked, smelled, said nothing. He tucked his hands under his armpits, not out of cold, but out of stillness. "Drink later," he simply said. "Not now." His eyes wandered from the buoy line to the searchlight and back again, as if he were measuring a pulse the sea had missed.

"Log," called the officer. The payboy bent over his notebook as if it were an altar. "Buoys set: nine. Distance: measured. Corridor: according to current." He raised his pen, waiting for the word we didn't want to find. "Any peculiarities?" "None," said the officer. That was the moment Ned laughed quietly. Not a sneer, just the sound of a man who knows that some words, if they're sound, stand up on their own.

We dropped the last buoy—the one without a pin. Improvisation? Not with this boatswain. He had a replacement he hated: a pin made of old brass, not designed for Type 3, but it took the place as if it were invited. It held. I didn't like how well it held.

"Corridor is closed," reported the boatswain. The bell rang for half an hour. The officer did what he did best: He walked along the line of people, checking whether their shoulders were still within the prescribed range. The lookout reported "Nothing" in the tone people use when they don't want to name something. The polite knock remained distant, a quality, not a place.

The wind had no desire to write stories. It stood still, allowed itself to be counted, and did nothing. Between buoys four and five, the current drew a fine, dark band, as if someone had marked the surface with a pencil. "Do you see that?" I asked the lens polisher. "I see that I don't want to see anything," he answered honestly.

"One more broom," the bridge allowed. Short, concise, no play. The beam wandered, hesitated, thinned, right where the corridor ceased to be water and began to play with intent. The officer clicked his tongue as if reprimanding a child. "Go on." The beam obeyed. I gritted my teeth to keep the clicking from using them as a stage.

"What if it likes the buoys?" asked the stoker, not mockingly. "Because they smell of order." "Then we'll send the office on board," said Ned, and for the first time, he sounded like someone willing to negotiate about something other than iron. The officer heard it, pretended he hadn't heard anything, because his world was held together by things he could name.

We waited for another half hour, and the corridor remained a corridor. The buoys nodded politely in a wave that wasn't one. I leaned over the railing, my hand flat on the wood, and felt the vibration that had accompanied us all night. Steady. Patient. It's amazing how much patience tastes like intention, if you hold it in your mouth long enough.

"Fitting," Ned said suddenly, and gestured to the boatswain for a thin auxiliary line. The officer started to say "forbidden," but never got around to it. Ned tied the line to a small, shiny eyelet in the railing—shiny because someone had been staring at it for days. He threw the free end into the corridor between four and five. The line lay against the skin of the water like a thread testing the authenticity of the fabric. Nothing. Then a twitch. Not a jerk, not a tug, just a twitch, as if someone were running two fingers over the beginning of a string. "See?" Ned said. No one answered. Someone reeled in the line. The end was dry. Too dry. I smelled it. No salt, just metal—not ours.

The mechanic suddenly looked as if he were a little embarrassed. He held the metal bowl at an angle. The knot of foreign fiber had some company: a second, thin band, this time not knotted, but wrapped twice around itself, like a ring for a finger that doesn't exist. "How did it come from?" asked the boatswain. The mechanic shrugged. "When the broom got thin." It was clear in his voice that he would rather not have told us, so as not to explain why he had looked the second he shouldn't have.

"Check the buoys," the officer decided. "Rod one." We fished buoy one aboard, checked the pin, checked the fishing line, the lock. Everything was honest. Buoy two: honest. Three: honest. Four: honest. Five... The pin was in place. The lock too. But on the edge of the sheet metal body, a chip was missing: round, clean, so small that only someone who knows where to look would find it. "Copper," said the mechanic, suddenly sounding like a priest holding a relic in his hands. "From our skin." A perfect circle, as if someone had smiled into the surface with a hole saw. Not a burr, not a dirt. Decency, even in the act of stealing.

The officer tensed up. "Entry: minor damage. Cause: collision with flotsam." The payboy wrote what he was dictated, giving the final item the most confidence on the entire sheet. I watched him and memorized the item the way you memorize the face of a thief pretending to be a police officer.

"Back into the water," the officer ordered. Buoy five slid back into the corridor. It turned for a moment, gave a polite half-bow—and then stood obediently back in line. I swore the gap to four and six was now a touch greater. Conseil stood beside me, so still I forgot he was breathing. "If it wanted to mark us," he said quietly, "it did it gracefully."

"What now?" asked the stoker, who for the first time in hours had no explanation up his sleeve. "Wait," said the officer. "Maintenance," corrected the mechanic, pushing the metal bowl to his stomach as if protecting an animal. "Vigilance," said the boatswain. Ned said nothing. His fingers rolled the harpoon shaft back and forth, like turning a coin about to decide who dies.

The bell continued to count, as if it wanted to redeem us by cutting the night into slices we could swallow. The sky barely brightened, but somehow more honest; the edges of things loomed like witnesses with bad memories. The corridor held as if it had a purpose we had brought with us, unknowing of it.

I put my hand in my coat pocket, searching for nothing, and found something: a thin, cold curl of the foreign fibers. Not big, not heavy. Neat. It didn't belong there. It didn't belong anywhere where pockets have names. I held it between my thumb and forefinger. It was dry, tasted of no in the air. Conseil saw it, and in his gaze was the suggestion of a glass, a label, a date. I put the curl back in my pocket. You don't just give the museum to a thief.

"Short broom," came again from the bridge. The finger of light swept out again, over water, over buoy four, five, six. It grew thin, of course. And when it lifted, the oil film outside moved only a fraction – two tongues forming a word no one wanted to read. The officer said "out," and the beam went off. The cold put its

hand on the back of my neck again and continued counting. There was a click behind my teeth, polite, patient, three short, two long, three short. Someone down below obviously had time. We had buoys, steel, paper, and a forbidden idea. Sometimes that's enough to survive the morning. Sometimes it just summons the courtesies of the depths. Today it called both.

It began with a hip thrust, as if the sea had bumped into us as we passed, just to see if we still had any backbone. No noise, no heroics. A brief, sideways thrust that pushed the ship half an inch out of its self-assurance. The rivets responded with a thin song that rose from the belly and rose through the planks to the knees. In the galley, a cup rang without anyone needing it. The stoker cursed: not at God, just at physics.

"Course?" asked the officer, and the helmsman named a number that was correct until it was wrong for two marks. The compass got a bit of a temper: It fussed, calmed down, pretended to find us again. "Engine?" "Clean," cried the stoker, offended that his steel should be set in the same sentence as ghosts. The polite drone from below remained the same quiet neighbor who waters the flowers when you're not there.

The searchlight remained under a cloth, the lens a covered eye. "No light," the officer reminded the night, and the night pretended it needed it. We stared into the space between buoys four and five. The corridor lay there like a thought written on paper and now pretending to be only in the mind. The oily film outside did its trick—two tongues briefly parting, kissing, arguing, becoming one again. And just at the moment when I was about to tell myself that I was just drawing old things into new shadows, a flat, dull strip of light pushed its way beneath the surface, as fine as if someone had struck a match under glass. No sparkle. No life rejoicing. A window without a house, sliding across the corridor, then stopping as if listening.

"Don't move," no one said, and we all obeyed. The officer groped for an order with his lips, found only teeth. The boatswain pinched his fingers into the edge of the bulwark, as if one could nail a ship's side with one's hands. Ned stood at the bow, the harpoon like a question one doesn't ask aloud, even if one already knows the answer. Conseil took an audible breath, then exhaled audibly, the exact amount of reason needed for ten men.

Again the hip thrust, minimal but confident. A sack of potatoes slid three handbreadths, stopped on a sill, and acted as if it were intentional. The bell on the mast didn't ring, but the metal vibrated so delicately that it was more noticeable on the tongue than the ear. "Cross sea," said the officer, as if the

word had to take responsibility. The stoker didn't respond. He held his hand to a pipe the way you feel a child's forehead when they pretend to be fine.

The lens polisher, who had been trying for hours to stand as if standing were his job, suddenly knelt down and ran his hand along the inside edge of the bulwarks. "Here," he whispered—too quietly for drama, loud enough for truth. At knee height, something lay wrapped around the pole that didn't belong there: a small, immaculate decorative knot made of the thin, black fiber ribbon we all recognized by its smell by now. No accidental twist. A Turkish knot, neat, proud, as if someone on board had wanted to pay the boatswain a courtesy. The boatswain stared at it like a painter stares at a forgery better painted than the original. "This is art," he blurted, nausea in his voice. "Art without commission."

The mechanic handed him the tweezers as if they were a cigarette you only smoke outdoors. The knot slid into the metal bowl and made that little tinny laugh. "Wind," the officer tried, not believing the sentence. No one corrected him. Politeness is a cheap repair.

Below us, the tone of the polite drone changed by a barely measurable grain. Not louder, not faster. More like a comma in a sentence that only the ship could read. I placed my hand flat against the wood and felt the beat take a tiny sip, as if tasting our skin. Conseil stepped beside me, as quietly as if he were preparing an anesthetic. "If water had patience," he murmured, "it wouldn't make banks." "You don't believe in water?" I asked. "I believe in clockworks," he said. "And that clockworks have someone who's had a hand in them."

The officer went to the logbook, because paper is still the only authority that doesn't tremble. "Slight abrasion. Visibility: dim. Special features: none." The paymaster wrote it down, the pen obeyed, and the moment the dot at the end settled, the flat glow returned, this time a touch further to starboard, exactly on the line between the buoys. It was as if someone were correcting the drawing, with more confidence.

"Short broom," the bridge allowed—that polite capitulation to reality. The mechanic lowered his hand onto the crank. The click jumped into my jaw, as always. The finger of light probed the surface, flat, respectful, and where the window hovered without a house, the beam thinned. Not torn, not eaten away. It became so narrow it was almost a wire sliding over something metallic. You could have sworn you saw a seam—not the boastful one of shipyards, more the humble one of repair. "Off," the officer said too quickly, and the mechanic obeyed as if he himself had needed the order.

As soon as the lens was blind again, there was a knock on the hull, hesitant at first, then with the old courtesy: three short, two long, three short. This time closer to the bow. The rescued man flinched, but held the net as if it were a promise he didn't want broken. Ned didn't take a step, but I saw his shoulders rise so slightly that you only notice it if you've looked at them too often. "If you want an answer," he murmured, "throw a question." He meant the harpoon, but didn't say so.

"No unauthorized actions," the officer blurted out, unsure whether he meant us or himself. He grabbed the envelope containing the regulations, as if one could read the rules aloud. "Mark, observe, distance." - "And if it responds?" asked the stoker. - "Then..." the officer began, leaving it open. The sea finished the sentence for him with a stroke against the keel so gentle it was almost tender.

The mechanic still had the crank in his hand, without moving it. "Under the bearing," he murmured, reaching blindly into the shadows. When he showed his fingers again, he held another ribbon made of the strange material, this time not knotted, but wrapped around itself twice—the beginning of a ring that hadn't decided to become jewelry. He placed it next to the Turkish fret. There were now two courtesies in the bowl, and the boatswain looked as if someone had cleaned up his church.

"Compass!" the helmsman suddenly shouted. We were all looking in the wrong direction, except for the officer, where it counts. The compass made a small, offended arc and returned to its normal position as if nothing had happened. "Iron?" asked the stoker, and the mechanic shook his head. "No stray field. No load shift." "Then someone looked at us politely," said Conseil. "Eyes create magnetism in minds."

Out of nowhere—out of this new, ordered nothingness—came a wave that didn't roll, but lifted. A single, long breath beneath the ship. We lifted ourselves. Not much. Enough. Something slipped in the coal bunker that we would later find again. The roll-up locker rattled, the tea in my cup made a circle on the wall, as if it were intentional art. Then everything fell back into place, as if someone had asked if we were awake and was satisfied with our blinking.

"I've had enough," the boatswain said suddenly, as if speaking to the sea and his mother. He grabbed a spare line, the thin one you usually discard, and tied it to an eyelet that had received too much attention in the last few days. He let the end sink slowly into the corridor, exactly between four and five, where the

stream had thinned. The line lay against the skin, doing nothing, being good. Then a tweak, gentle, like a cat testing whether you're still awake. The boatswain reeled in, checked the end. Not wet. Not salty. Just cold. I smelled it. Metal, clean as a dentist's office.

"Take it away," ordered the officer, too late, too quietly. Ned was now standing in such a way that one could say his body had already cast without the harpoon having flown. "Another broom," he didn't ask. He waited. The mechanic pulled the cloth a crack, as if just letting in some fresh air. The click jumped into my jaw. The beam groped, and this time we all saw the window. It was longer. It didn't move, but let the beam pass over it, and each time the light passed over it, it thinned, as if giving way—not out of weakness, but out of politeness. When the beam left the edge, a pale trail remained on the water, a heartbeat long, like a memory immediately denied.

"Out," said the officer, and the beam obeyed, as if it were itself relieved. In the silence that followed, one suddenly heard two things that one had previously considered one and the same: the engine—well-behaved, self-possessed—and beneath it, the other—patient, present. The overlap formed a chord that wasn't beautiful, only precise. "If it wanted to mark us," Conseil said quietly, "it would take something we don't lack." "We never lack anything," growled the boatswain, who knew the lies of the deck. "We're only pretending."

The lens polisher, pale but curious, crawled along the inner bulwarks once more. "Another one," he breathed. This time, no knot, no ring. A smooth, tight twist around a bolt, as clean as if someone had passed a knot test while blind and underwater. The boatswain untied it, looking sorry. "Whoever that is," he said, "has hands. Or something hands can do better."

"Log," demanded the officer, stubbornly heading in the direction he was good at. "Cross-motion. Slight magnetic deviation. Visibility: restricted. Special features:" He paused. "Unclear." The paymaster wrote "Unclear" as if he'd never used the word before. I liked him for that moment.

"It'll come again," said Ned, and the confidence in his voice wasn't boasting. The hip thrust came, very gently, as promised. This time the rivets didn't sing; they hummed along. On the water, where the corridor tapered slightly, that dull stripe rose again. Not long, not high. Just enough to make me want to reach out, even though there was space between. I didn't. Some gestures are invitations you don't want to send.

Then, as if someone had plucked at reality with two fingers, everything was smooth again. The compass acted as if it had never been naughty. The buoys stood in their orderly line. The air once again smelled only of tea, iodine, and that honest piece of metal that belongs to us. The officer took a breath, one of those religious ones, and said, "Carry on calmly," as if there were a way to carry on that was anything other than waiting.

We stood again where men stand when they act as if today were just another day. The mechanic placed the tin bowl with the two, now three foreign fibers against his stomach, the boatswain counted knots that no one cares about, the lens polisher studied his own fingers as if they were lenses, Conseil memorized a list with his eyes, Ned stroked the shaft of the harpoon once as if he were calming not the wood but himself. I held my hand to the wood, felt the rhythm – ours and the others'. And somewhere very close, beneath the spot where the cup had played by itself a moment ago, my teeth clicked again: three short clicks, two long clicks, three short clicks. As practice. As a greeting. Or as patience that doesn't wait for a tip.

In the end, this small, unseemly detail remained, one that none of us mentioned: A drop condensed on the inside of the bulwark and began to run upwards against the slope, slowly, resolutely, until it stopped at the edge like a soldier. Then it detached itself, fell into nothingness, and left no mark. We all pretended we hadn't seen it. Some things lose their power when they're asserted. Others only grow then. Today we chose silence.

There had to be a second somewhere when waiting becomes a pose. Just then, Ned stood up, as if someone had pulled him up on an invisible rope. No big deal. He stepped forward, to where Holz begins to think toward the water, raised the harpoon as calmly as if it were a tool and not an opinion, and said simply, "Practice."

The officer began to mouth the prohibition, that word often sold on board as a charm. It stuck in his mouth like a bad fishbone. "No—" he began. Ned nodded, friendly as a man explaining to a beggar that he himself has nothing. "Practice," he repeated, pointing to the corridor between buoys four and five. "Target acquisition. Dry."

The boatswain brought a slack line, thin, honest, far too proper for what she was about to learn. Ned ran it through the ring on the shaft, not knotted, just hung up so it would come loose if one of us needed to learn something new. "Just hold it with two fingers," he said to the lens polisher, who stood beside

him as if standing were his new religion. "If it pulls, you let go. If it doesn't pull, you say something different later."

"No light," the officer reminded the world. The mechanic pretended to hear this, but pushed the cloth aside a finger's width with two fingers. The lens blinked. The click jumped into my jaw, as accurate as an accountant. A short sweep, flat across the surface of the sea, and again the beam thinned where the corridor played an invitation. Exactly where the water looked like a window without a house.

Ned didn't wait for drama. He took a single breath, put his weight on his hip, and let the iron go. No scream, no "look out." Just flight. The harpoon cut the air with the sound wood makes when it knows it's work today. For a moment, nothing happened that the mind can put into words. Then a sound came back, quiet, dull, indecently matter-of-fact: no flesh, no bone, no screaming of anything. A metallic thunk that promised more than it said. The line vibrated not like line, but like string. We didn't pull it, it pulled us, a breath, just far enough for the body to understand that pulls can also be gifts.

"Let go!" the officer snarled, his voice finally knowing where it belonged again. The lens polisher let go, politely like a student who's seen a cane. The line remained taut nonetheless, just enough to make the corridor make sense. Ned planted his feet as if he had roots; the cleat suddenly had a task that wasn't in the schedule. The bosun joined in, flatly, unemotionally. "Don't pull," he muttered. "Not yet."

Then the other sound, the smaller one, but still bigger: slick. Not long. Not loud. A clean parting in the auxiliary line, a hand's breadth behind the ring. No fraying, which salt loves. An edge so smooth that the wind slipped on it. The lens polisher—too close to the action—took a half-step into the void, and the void was ready for action today. I grabbed his collar, Conseil grabbed mine, the bosun grabbed reality, and together we brought him back to the side that has names. His lips formed the word "thank you" and rejected it because it was expensive today.

"No one overboard!" yelled the officer, as if someone had misunderstood the plan. He grabbed the lifebuoy handling protocol. "Line broken! Take note!" "Not broken," said the boatswain, his voice like a saw without teeth. "Decide."

Beneath us, the depths made no gesture, but instead did what they've been able to do for days: set patience in rhythm. Three short, two long, three short.

Not on wood. In the ankles. In the teeth. In that part of the air that ceases to be air when it's needed.

"Lift," Ned said, very quietly, against his own hand. We pulled. The line didn't come out stubbornly, not obediently, it came out like someone who knows we're going to talk about it. Two meters, three, a jerk that didn't want to be one, then slip, slip again, as if it were passing through unseen fingers. The mechanic held the tin bowl as if he were about to baptize. The boatswain tasted the air to see if Salt was offended. Conseil stood so still you could hear the sharpness of his thought.

The tip came first. No triumph. No blood. Just a smell that didn't belong on this deck: shiny, cold, with the politeness of freshly polished intent. On the steel were fine abrasions that looked like scales, but weren't. Thin, glittering shreds, not fish, not wood. Varnish, my mind said, and the word smacked of a workshop where men are overly meticulous. Next to it, a narrow line, black like the thread in Conseil's bowl. A whiff of solvent rose, that fleeting one that numbs the tongue to a single breath.

"Barrel," breathed the lens polisher, too late in his own body. "Not a barrel," Ned contradicted without looking up. He brushed away the abrasions with his thumb, carefully, as if one could wipe clean a statement. "Barrel scratches differently. This one bounced back."

"Miss," the officer dictated to the payman, who acted as if he knew the word personally. The boatswain looked at him as if someone had just explained to him that water was actually dust. "If that was a miss," he said, "I never want to hit the target." He held up the cut end of the slack line. "Wind?" he asked pleasantly. No one answered.

"One more broom," no one asked or commanded. The mechanic, naughty in the right way, pushed the lens open a finger's width. The click took my jaw in its hand like an old acquaintance. The beam swept over the line of buoys, danced briefly on five, thinned where it wanted to be thin, and as it passed over the spot where the harpoon had learned to behave so rudely, I saw it clearly: two parallel lines beneath the surface, a hint of a seam, and between them a duller surface, as if there weren't water there, but something only politely imitating water.

"Off," said the officer, and the beam obeyed, glad not to have to lie. The moment it became dark enough again, something caught on the line. Not forcefully, not boldly. A slight tug, just enough to make every man on deck look

for his shoulder. We held. The line gave way, came, stopped, came. A game no animal plays when it's busy. More like someone trying to see how much politeness we can tolerate.

"Release," Conseil advised, not pleading. Ned let go an inch, two, and right then, a jerk went through the rope, smooth, calculating, like a handshake you immediately regret. A second snap, this time further forward, where the first safety coil was. Clean, of course. The line lost another piece. "He takes what we give," said the boatswain. "And gives—" He fell silent.

He actually gave it. When we had the harpoon all the way on board, something hung from the edge of the handle that shouldn't have been there: a narrow, carefully placed band of the foreign fiber, folded over twice, the beginning of a knot that had decided to remain polite. The mechanic, tenderly as one wouldn't want to be, placed it in the tin bowl with the others. The bowl laughed again. This time everyone heard it.

"Engine?" the officer asked aft, out of habit, and the engine answered with the only true truth: it continued to hum, decently, without a new note. Below, the knocking started again, this time not on the wood, but in the small, dented cup I had set down somewhere. Three, two, three. Not loud. Just close.

"We now have proof," said Conseil, "and no name." He held the harpoon tip up to the lamp. In the light, the abrasions gleamed not like fish, but like paint that had been sprayed too finely somewhere. "Primer," murmured the mechanic, and I liked him in that moment because he used words that belonged to another continent.

"Entry," demanded the officer, clinging to paper the way one clings to good suits when the weather suggests otherwise. The paymaster wrote: "Practice. Cast. Result: unclear." He hesitated. "Material abrasion on tip. Line..." - "Cut," the boatswain helped. "Clean."

Ned tapped the stem, not superstitiously, merely conscientiously. "One more," he said, not as a question, but more as an offer to the world. The officer raised his head, searched for his pipe, found it, put it away again, and then said the phrase one says when one sees that rules are often late: "No second chance without orders." Ned didn't grin. He just stood there, and his position conveyed the opposite of agreement.

From the corridor came a sound none of us recognized, yet we recognized it: not the slurping of a wave, not the snorting of an animal, not the whirring of a

wire. More like the short, drawn-out exhalation of a valve when it decides to be good. A fine mist settled over the surface, barely wider than an arm, and disappeared before a story could emerge. I smelled the air. It smelled of metal that knows polish and has no time for rust.

"Buoys holding course," the boatswain reported, although no one had asked. Buoy five—the one with the missing chip—did a small, polite turn on its own axis and then stood back in line as if it had just winked at us. The mechanic looked at the searchlight, and the searchlight did what eyes do when you ask them to keep their heads: It stayed closed.

"If it has sense," said Conseil, "it has a sense of humor I don't like." He wiped the tip with rubbing alcohol, which briefly smelled like a pharmacy that never has to close. A wafer-thin film came off and clung to the cloth, greenish in color, the kind of green men call "technology" when they don't know what it's made of.

The officer gathered himself for a decision and came up with the smallest one: "Maintain the corridor. Double the watch. No harpoon throws without orders. No light except brooms. No superstition on duty." He pronounced the last word more slowly so it had the weight it never had in court. The boatswain nodded, because nodding is the cheapest form of pay. Ned put down the harpoon, as gently as if explaining to a cat that there were no mice today.

I lifted the cut end of the lanyard. It felt light in my hand, too light for something that had just been pulling on our story. The edge was so smooth it reflected light. I placed it on the plank, and it slid, even though the plank was dry. That was my little impossibility of the day: things that decide for themselves which way is up.

"Four more days," someone murmured. "If it stays polite." Ned heard, pretended not to, and looked out at the buoys marking our corridor like a smile no one meant sincerely. The corridor remained. The depths knocked, patiently, three short knocks, two long knocks, three short knocks. And the harpoon lay there, smelling of varnish instead of blood. I would have laughed if it hadn't occurred to me that laughter is also a kind of response—and down here, responses are apparently habitually acknowledged.

There are moments when the ship acts as if it were just household goods. No one screams, no one runs, no one dies – and just then, the world drops something at your feet that looks like a delivery. And so it happened: no alarm, no splash, no cursing. Suddenly, at the starboard railing, clean as a lunch plate,

was one of our buoys. Not out in the row, not on the hook, not in the water. On board. Quiet, well-behaved, the paint still damp from the sea – and at the eyelet, a knot that no one here would dare tie because it reeks of effort.

The boatswain was the first to see it, stopped like someone looking for a good joke and found an obituary. "Who—" he began, and bit off the end, because everyone was thinking "who" and no one had any idea where to put their finger. The buoy wasn't chipped, just tidy. On the edge, where salt usually leaves its little teeth, not a crumb. And stuck to the clasp was a brass pin, exactly the type we were missing from the box a moment ago. Neatly pressed in, flush, without a dent. As if someone had flipped through a catalog and opted for "Correct Fit."

"Take it up," said the officer, very calmly, because calm is the cheapest currency on board. We hoisted the thing onto the planks. It didn't sound like tin. It sounded like someone was asking a question. The lens polisher licked his lips nervously, as if there was sugar somewhere in the mix, about to come out. Ned stood at the edge, harpoon at his shoulder, as if he were teaching a child not to run out into the world. Conseil placed his hand flat on the buoy, raised it again, and smelled his fingers. "Polish," he said. "Not ours."

The boatswain bent over the knot. A small, devoted act of meanness made of that thin, black fiber that's been clinging to us like a rumor for days. The knot wasn't a silly thing. A neat, double-laid roring, so precise that the hull suddenly looked poorly made. "Craftsmanship," the boatswain murmured, and I could tell he wasn't referring to us. He dipped his fingers into it, twisted, tested, and nodded, gritted teeth, like a man who hates his enemy for his diligence. "That out there can do more than saw."

The officer stood stiff as a border post. "To the workshop," he ordered, as if an insult could be catalogued. "Documented." The payroll clerk flinched as if he'd just been invited for the first time in his life. He fumbled with his pen and notebook, dipped too deeply, and the ink stuck to the tip like uncertainty to his voice. "Precaution—" he began. "No incident," the officer cut in. Two words that are alike to the teeth, yet have different endings.

We lifted the buoy onto the trestle near the lamp carriage. The mechanic slid his hand under the cap, felt, pulled. A quiet click, that perfect, insulting cleanliness. "Pin's in place," he commented dryly. I took the other brass pin from my coat pocket—the one that had been in my fist last night like a bad omen—and held them both side by side. Twins, except mine carried the warmth things get when they've just been immersed in a story. The one on the

buoy was cold. Refrigerator cold. Impossible, in this air. I put mine back in and pretended I hadn't noticed.

"Who counted the row?" Ned asked into the wind. The lookout raised his hand: "All nine out when I last—" He broke off because the sentence required a clock that no one wanted to set. We stared at the gap outside, between four and five, which wasn't a hole and yet smelled like one. The buoys nodded evenly, the line held its ground. "That makes ten," murmured the stoker, and I liked his math because it translated fear into worksheets.

Conseil took the spirit glass from the roll-up bed, that little aquarium for things that shouldn't breathe. He picked up the knot of fiber with the tweezers and lowered it into the alcohol. No bubbles, no escape. The tape lay there as if it were in session. Next to it, with the same polite care, he placed the brass pin. The pin made a quiet "tock" on the glass. "Exhibits A and B," Conseil said, not ironically.

"Origin?" the officer persisted, and I wished I could hold a mirror up to his question. "We'll find out," Conseil replied, "if we stay alive." He screwed on the lid and put the jar in the cupboard, where jars live whose contents you can't hear screaming. I knew he would later write labels, neat, small, and obsessed with dates. He's the judge who only summons experts.

The boatswain didn't untie the knot at the eyelet. He eyed it as if tying a pickpocket's shoe. "If I loosen this one, I'll learn something. If I let it, it'll learn something about me." He chose to learn. Needles out, knife out. He worked the ribbon, not roughly, not delicately. The knot grew back into its details, and every detail reeked of intention. When he held the end in his hand, he didn't throw it away. He pocketed it. "For later," he said. "When I think the wind does that again."

We checked the buoy body. No new dents, just the old, clean circular chip from the day before—that little impertinence on edge five, perfectly round, as if someone had smiled across it with a hole saw. The mechanic ran a nail along the ridge but didn't find one. "Workbench," he muttered. "No sea."

"Log," ordered the officer. The payboy wrote: "Buoy check. One unit on deck for inspection." He waited. "Any special features?" "Routine," said the officer. Ned snorted softly. The boatswain coughed his sneer into a rope. Conseil remained silent, but his silence made room.

The finger of light was granted a moment's grace. "Short broom," the bridge permitted, as if one were allowed to steal a cigarette from the day. The click jumped into my teeth, good, the jet skimmed just above the surface of the water, cutting nothing, touching everything, lingering for a breath above the corridor, and—logically—diluted where the invitation was written. The lookout didn't call "breath." He merely held out his hand, as if feeling the temperature. The officer said "off," and the light obeyed, as if it didn't want to contradict itself.

Shortly afterward, someone dared to say something ridiculous: "Maybe someone brought her over," suggested the stoker, "for inspection. Hey, I would have done it too." He waited for approval, but didn't find it. There are lies you have to bear alone, even if they're dressed up as hypotheses. "Who?" asked the boatswain. "And why no noise?" The stoker shrugged his shoulders, as if he were about to call his mother.

I lifted the buoy by the shaft. It was heavy, honestly. In one spot, a hand's breadth below the eyelet, my hand remained dry. Not "a little wet." Dry. A circle, precise, as if someone had wiped the sea there. I placed my fingers on it, felt a coldness that had nothing to do with water. "Here," I said to Conseil. He put his ear to it, heard nothing, smelled nothing, wiped it with a rag – the rag remained clean. "Outlet," he murmured. "Or pad. No salt, no film. Just politeness."

The officer let the watch go slow. "Two bells," he announced, even though it was one, and the time fell into place, because time at sea is the only thing that matters without proof. The watch was doubled, men stood, men pretended to move for reasons. Ned knelt by the rail and glanced into the corridor. Not hunting. Waiting. A patience that frightened me more than his throw.

The lens polisher, who always teeters between courage and fragility like a plate on its edge, picked up the cut piece of auxiliary line from the previous day, placed it next to the buoy, and examined both ends. "I had a dream," he said quietly. "That someone was walking around us at night with very small scissors, cleaning us." "Dreams are forbidden on duty," the officer growled. "Then it was waking," the boy replied, and I would have gladly given him a medal for his honesty.

"Do you hear?" asked the lookout, and we heard what we had hoped would have been long gone: three short, two long, three short—not in the hull, not in the jaw, but in the metal body of the buoy itself. A quiet, built-in greeting. The sound wasn't muffled. It was orderly, as if coming from hands that had learned

how to make politeness sound. The officer raised his hand as if to silence the noise. Sounds can't be stopped if they're not ours.

The mechanic tapped the buoy's body with the handle of a screwdriver—"ping"—and the response was the same polite pattern, only quieter, as if someone were making a joke that wasn't meant to be funny. "Valve," said the stoker, comforting himself. "Overpressure." "Underpressure," Ned corrected, looking as if he knew how to spell the word.

The report crept out of the officer's pocket again. "Buoys remain on board until the end of the inspection. No light without—" He paused. On the paint of the buoy, where the metal usually does what it does in the sun, there was a thin, pale green trail. Not paint. Not algae. A smudged line, as if two fingers had laid there, unaware of how dirty they were. Conseil took the spirit and wiped. The trail was there, but slowly. And in the wipe, something remained that you call "workshop smell," if you don't want to say "workshop."

"I want the log," the payboy suddenly said to the officer, in a voice that sounded frightened as it came out. "I want to write 'precaution.'" The officer looked at him as if someone had stolen his rank from his collar. "You write what I dictate." The payboy nodded and wrote anyway: "Survived on board: marked equipment. Condition: unremarkable. Precaution: elevated." He made the period small, as if to hide it. The officer pretended he hadn't seen it, and I pretended I'd forgotten how to be grateful.

Later—in the kind of later that still lies in the midst of the present—the bosun carried the buoy two steps aft, just to make room. When he set it down again, it rolled back half an inch against the ship's direction of travel. Not much. Just enough that you only notice it if you haven't had enough sleep for several nights. The bosun remained silent, placed a wedge. The wedge remained, the buoy rested as if nothing had ever happened.

"What if this is a return?" I asked, and no one pretended the question was stupid. Ned rubbed his thumb against a notch in his shaft, caught it, and let go. "Then we won't thank you." "We'll accept it," Conseil added. "And we'll label it."

Later, in the sick roll, the glass containing the knot and the pen clinked. Not much. Just as if a train had passed through the city. Conseil tightened the screw, pulled the seal twice, and positioned the glass so that the objects inside looked as if they could write poetry. He placed a piece of paper next to it: date,

time, place. "And what do you write under 'origin'?" I asked. "Politeness," he said. "Until someone cleverer lies."

Outside, the current was rearranging the corridor, the buoys playing their little, stubborn music. The lens remained closed, the officer remained stern, the paymaster remained defiant, the boatswain remained offended, the mechanic remained in love with his tin shell. The stoker pretended to believe in valves, and the lens polisher kept his hands steady because trembling would now be considered evidence. Ned stood at the bow, counting nothing, his kind of prayer.

I sat down at the railing, raised my eyes to the spot between four and five where the invitation resides, and noticed that the polite drone was back, closer, less agitated. I put my hand in my pocket to feel the brass pin I'd put back that morning. It wasn't there. In its place lay the thin sliver of fiber, closed into a small, perfect circle—dry, cold, ridiculously neat. I didn't let on. I placed the ring on my tongue like a coin and picked it up again. It tasted like no.

As I slid it back into my pocket, the buoy on the stand clanged the pattern: three short, two long, three short. Not loudly. Just close. The officer did what he can: He dictated "routine" to the payboy. He wrote it down, his pen barely trembling. The cold put its hand on the back of our necks again and counted along. And for exactly one breath, the brass pin in the felt compartment of the box—the one that was "missing" and that no one missed now—seemed to rotate of its own accord in the direction of the corridor outside. No one saw it. Or all of them did.

Morning came without color, only with contours. First he laid a thin line along the edges of things, then he rubbed the gray into decent edges. We stood as if we'd been positioned like that for years, our skin tired, our bones full of salt, our eyes on the corridor between Four and Five, which hung out on the water like a too-precisely drawn line in a poor balance sheet. The officer did what he knew by heart: He gave orders that sounded like teeth. "Hold course. Double watch. No light except brooms. No heroes." It comforted him. Not us.

The polite drone below began again, like a neighbor watering the flowers on time. Next to the hum of our engine, it lay there again, outrageously patient, steady, without soft edges. I put my hand to the bulwarks. Our rhythm—good, as always. And beneath it, this other one, who had no desire to orient itself to us. Ned stood at the bow, harpoon loose, his shoulders the only ones on board who acted as if they were staying voluntarily. Conseil emerged from the sick

roll, smelling of iodine and lack of sleep, and wore the look of a man who doesn't believe in miracles but has labels ready when they happen.

"Short broom," approved the bridge, and the lens blinked. The click jumped into my jaw as if I were a poorly paid switchboard. The beam shot out—flat, polite, without ambition—scanned the surface, brushed over the buoys like a raised index finger, and thinned where the corridor again behaved like an invitation. For a moment, I had the impression that the water was taking the thread of light in its hand and guiding it itself, slowly, cleanly, as if someone were tracing something beneath the skin. Then "off," and the lens was cloth again.

"Breath," the lookout didn't call—perhaps because the word hadn't settled on him yesterday. But the spot in the middle of the corridor was enveloped by that whiff of mist that didn't warm, didn't ripple, but merely acted as if air on the surface could be caught at work. No animal. No pomp. A technical sigh. "Valve," murmured the stoker, as if he wanted to sort language back into its cabinets. No one objected, no one nodded. We spared ourselves the gesture.

The boatswain went over the knots, his fingers still angry, his mouth sparing. Overnight, he had pocketed the strange ring knot made from the thin ribbon, as if it were a hated talisman. The mechanic held his tin bowl like a stroller and had now collected three or four of these neat, nasty things: a Turkish fret, a simple hammer, a half ring—all clean, all dry, all thin as a judge's thread of patience. The lens polisher stood too close to reality, his hands buried lest they reveal the whereabouts of his years.

Then came the jerk that didn't want to be one. Not a pitching, not a broad jolt. More like a gentle grip on the ship's ribs, like the hand of a doctor checking to see if you're still breathing properly. The compass turned its dial a fraction, offended, and stood rooted to the spot again. "Not our engine," said the stoker this time, calmly because he knew his gods. "It's doing what it's supposed to." The officer wedged the word "cross sea" between us and the silence like a wedge. It didn't hold.

"Another broom," no one asked, and the mechanic did it anyway, naughtily in the right way: a quick finger of light, a try. This time I saw something my mind wanted to assign to forms it had no contract with: the beam grew so thin it became a wire, and over there, two yards inside the corridor, a line appeared below it, not crisscrossed but straight, as if someone had laid a seam on the night. No shipyard pose, no fat bulge. A modest weld that looked more like a scar someone had hidden out of politeness. The beam passed over it without

crime, but each time it did, it grew a shade paler, as if someone were stoically taking a sip from it. "Out," the officer said too quickly, and the mechanic obeyed, relieved, as if he were allowed to lie again.

"Machine skin," Conseil murmured beside me, more to his needle hand than to me. "Or a fear that's learned sweat." He sniffed the air. It smelled of metal, but not of us. Of the factory floor, of polish, of that part of the world that finds rust an insult.

The bell struck half-gaze, and immediately afterward—not before, not later—came: klop-klop-klop, klop—klop, klop-klop-klop. The old, polite code, cleaner than yesterday, denser, closer to midship. The payboy looked up for help, as if the syntax had just explained his homework. The officer did what was left to him: He pretended it was a coincidence and told his voice to hold on to the next order before it began to tremble. "Keep watch. No private interpretation. If anything—" He realized the sentence had too many doors and left it in the corridor.

We began to transform ourselves back into the statues you need when you're staring at nothingness. The corridor outside had the courtesy to stay where we'd left it. A gust of wind carried a smell that hadn't left my mind since the first night: that bare, sterile metal that can't be allowed to rust, otherwise someone will terminate the contract. Then it happened.

Not big. Not loud. No death that needs noise. A*pop*from the inside of the side of the ship, as cleanly as if a stamp had been used in a very, very quiet workshop. I turned my head, the bosun turned his hands, the mechanic turned the world. At knee height in the bulwarks, a round hole suddenly gaped, no bigger than a coin the size "not mine", the edge so smooth that one could reflect one's certainties in it. Onto the plank fell – not rolling, not bouncing – a small, perfect copper shaving, circular, no nicks, no crumbs, warm even though the air was cold. It stayed there as if it were from around here and had merely briefly visited another city.

"Corrosion," said the officer, to his own rescue. The boatswain picked up the chip, weighed it, smelled it, pressed his thumb to the edge, and didn't cut himself. "Corrosion doesn't make business cards," he observed. The mechanic took the circle from my hand and laid it flat on the plank. I expected it to roll, the way things on ships like to roll, seeking stories. It didn't. It rotated slowly on its own axis, once, exactly once, and stopped with an invisible mark pointing toward the corridor. I would have sworn he had planned it that way.

"Log!" The officer clung to the word like a railing. "Loss of material on the bulwarks. Cause: flotsam. Repair when the opportunity arises." The paymaster wrote it down, dutifully, only his period at the end was a little bouncy. Conseil looked at me without looking at me, and I knew he would wipe the edge of the hole later, searching for the smell that shouldn't dwell on ships.

"The sheet metal skin is shiny inside," said the mechanic after shining his light into the hole. "No burr. No draft. As if someone from outside had…" He didn't finish the sentence. You can also say sentences by letting them lie. The bosun tapped gently on the outside, but the edge didn't respond. It was too well-behaved.

"Short broom," the bridge allowed again, as if to prove we still had our hand on the switch. The beam probed out, glided over the row of buoys, and at the precise moment it crossed the corridor where the scar had slept, the water lifted—not up, not high, just out of proportion. A curve so gentle you were ashamed to think you saw it. No animal surfaces like that. No metal needs to apologize for it. A wisp of steam hung over it, as if someone had opened a cold bottle. "Off," called the officer, and the lens was grateful to be blind again.

"When it marks you," said Conseil, his tone like that of a man measuring thread, "it always takes it where you don't need it—until you do." He took the copper circle from the mechanic's hand, placed it in a new glass that still smelled of spirit, and let it go. It sank as if it had never done anything else. The ring of foreign fiber—the one from the knot on the buoy—got company. Two pleasantries in the same aquarium.

On the deck, the lens polisher knelt at the bulwark hole and smoothed the edge with his nail. Nothing stuck. He peppered his disbelief into the wood by not cursing. "I once watched in a shipyard," he whispered. "How they take core samples when they test steel." - "We're not a laboratory," growled the officer. - "Today, we are," said the mechanic.

The bell rang out to a full chime, and when its tolling died away, the answer came again, no longer a chime, but a programmatic one: three short, two long, three short. I felt it in my jaw, heard it in the hull, saw it—I swear—trembling in the water's surface, as if sound could move the surface if it tried. The officer smiled stiffly, took the clapper, struck again—and again the sequence came, very politely, precisely. Synchronicity or mockery: One would have been allowed to vote if voting had achieved anything here.

"Does he want to talk?" asked the stoker, his voice too deep to be ridiculous. "Let's learn to talk by remaining silent," said Conseil, pushing the glass into the cupboard. "And count." He wrote a time on the piece of paper he had stuck next to it, then another, then the time for the bell. Next to "smell," he wrote "factory."

Ned stood, his harpoon sideways, staring into the corridor as if his language were buried there. "If he shows himself," he said, "I won't throw. I'll make a move. Throwing is for animals." The officer heard him, pretended it didn't give him a rash, and dictated "no more throw" into the air, so it would carry the word until it grew tired. Sometimes he was easier to like when he pretended paper was a sword.

We groped our way through the next half hour as if through a room where the light is out, but you still know the table. The corridor remained a corridor, the buoys lined up in a line that felt like teeth that were too neat. The oily film outside did its thing again – two tongues that briefly parted, as if trying to form a word no one wanted to read. The mechanic pulled another fine ribbon from the headlight bearing, this one only as long as a finger. No burrs, no salt. "From the wind," he said no more.

"You'll close the hole," the boatswain stated. "With what?" "With time," the officer replied, instructing the world to send a man with a plate later to test our consciences again. "For now, it remains open. We're monitoring. We..." He searched for a verb that wouldn't hurt. "...take note."

I placed two fingers on the edge—inside, ever so lightly—expecting the coldness of the metal. Instead, I felt a shallow, unfriendly warmth that didn't come from the ship. As if someone on the other side of the skin were holding out their hand, waiting to see if we would press back. I pulled my fingers away as if I'd been burned, and pretended it was dignity.

The payboy came with his notebook and pointed to his note. He had written "Precautions Increased" in small, almost shamefaced print, as if he knew that words don't survive without orders. The officer nodded, half asleep, half at war. "Routine," he corrected aloud. The payboy didn't cross it out. He let both words live side by side. Sometimes paper is better than people.

"One more broom," the bridge decided, and the finger of light stroked the flat skin of the corridor one last time. Exactly above the spot where the scar had slept, the beam became so thin it almost disappeared. For a moment, I saw a curve beneath it, no larger than two men's widths, and above it a dull surface,

as if looking through water at painted iron. No wonder, no war. A glimpse into a workshop that had decided to play at the sea. "Out," whispered the officer, though everyone inside us was screaming.

We stopped because movement sends invitations. The machine hummed its honest melody, the other hummed its patience. The copper circle in the glass in the cupboard clinked softly, not like an alarm, more like a man politely rising when a lady enters the room. The boatswain briefly placed his hand on my shoulder, just to check I was still there. "If it wants us," he said, "it'll take us so clean that not even the sea will be offended." - "Then we'll stay dirty," I replied. He grinned with a mouth too old for it.

The bell finally wanted to say something definitive—changing of the guard. New mouths, old eyes. One of the freshmen stumbled over nothing and caught himself on the bulwarks. His fingers hit the hole, and he recoiled as if he'd stroked a cat in the wrong place. "Warm," he gasped. Conseil nodded, wrote the word under "phenomenon," so small, as if he had to be careful not to let it grow.

Just before the streak of light on the horizon finally brought color from my memory, the final thing happened that made the morning a morning: The copper shaving in the glass detached itself from the bottom, lifted a finger's width without a bubble, half-turned, and lay down again—with the invisible mark, which only I thought I saw, pointing directly toward the corridor. I said nothing. Some evidence thrives in peace. Others consume it.

We stayed on course, polite like debtors who've learned to deliver bills in person. The buoys stood out there like a smile that no one meant sincerely. Below us, someone was counting again: three short, two long, three short. Not pushy. Just reliable. Ned ran his hand over the notch in the shaft. The officer smoothed his uniform. Conseil crossed off a new line in his list. I ran my tongue over my teeth and heard the click. It suddenly sounded less like fear than like an appointment. I don't know if that's better.

The day arrived as if it had apologized: a pale edge, a faint breath, enough light to confuse lies with truth. The cold no longer laid its hand on our necks; it only wrote its finger along the side of the ship, as if trying to determine who had stayed behind. The engine hummed in its pious rhythm, beneath it that other, polite and patient voice that had become more a part of us than any prayer.

The crew split up without marching. One said "animal," as if that were a consolation, because animals die. Another said "machine," and that sounded

like an accusation, because machines endure. Three stuck to "rum" because a mistake you can drink hurts less than one you write back. Conseil moved between the camps like a man with a pipette between two fires. "If it were an animal, it would eat," he said to those expecting catches. "If it's a machine, it would calculate," he said to those who saw screws in their dreams. "If you're right, you're still too late," he told both of them.

The officer leaned on the report like a stick. "Routine," he dictated to the payroll clerk, and the clerk wrote the word as if it were glued to his pen. With his own courage from yesterday, he came through the door, wrote "Precautions increased" again in small print underneath, and let it stand like a mistake that survived scrutiny. The officer acted as if the writing were invisible. Paper could be ignored. Not the hole in the bulwarks. Certainly not the perfect copper circle in the glass in the sick roll; it lay there like a silent witness who had decided not to speak until the decisive moment.

Ned stood at the bow, the harpoon at his shoulder, as if it were an old dog who couldn't attack anyone today. He said nothing, but his silence held sentences. I heard one: "Next time, in full light." Yesterday he had vowed to abstain; today his decision was a calmer rage: no more casting shadows when they're cast. A man can carry two truths, as long as he doesn't speak them simultaneously.

The buoys outside continued to stand like teeth in a too-tidy mouth. The corridor stretched between number four and number five, our embarrassing line under a bill no one wants to pay. The oily film did its trick: two tongues, a hint of a smile, an arch that needed no geography. I could have sworn it was growing. Perhaps it was just the day giving it shape.

"Reports," the officer demanded, but didn't get any he liked. The stoker said his pipes were as good as they were on a port morning. The mechanic lifted his tin tray—inside were the courtesies in thin, black ribbon, neat as registers of sins: Turkish band, half ring, close hitch. "Wind," no one said again. The boatswain didn't even glance at them, his fingers testing knots made by humans. "If this one," he grumbled, tapping the railing with his knuckle, "gets warm again without the sun inviting it to, I'll rip it out and sew it back on with my teeth."

The lens polisher, whose hands had been shaking during the night, now held them calmly in his pockets, as if two small, stubborn animals living there needed sleep. He said quietly, "I'm not thirsty anymore. That's the worst." Conseil looked at him, checked his pupils, and opened the flashlight just wide enough to prevent any light from escaping. "Good," he nodded. "If you get thirsty again, drink water. If you don't get thirsty again, wake me up."

The bell decreed a half-truth. Then there was a knock, friendly as always: three short, two long, three short. Not louder; just as if someone had finally found the right wood to carry the message beautifully. The officer ignored the knock with that duty one admires as long as one isn't standing on it. He dictated, "Visibility: moderate. Course: equal. Special features: none." The payboy wrote it down, and I wished paper had a backbone.

"Light fingers," the bridge demanded a little later, "just a broom." The canvas lifted a crack, the click jumping into my jaw, as true as grief. The thread of light swept flat across the water—then thinned where our invitation lay. Below it, a hand's breadth lower, that dim window passed by again, a house without an address. I saw—not for the first time—two parallel shadows that looked like the seams of a plan. "Out," said the officer. The day remained gray, but more honest. That much honesty was enough to finally pull the crew apart.

"Machine," the stoker said openly, as if someone had untied him. "Valves, locks, whatnot. But intentionally." - "Animal," countered yesterday's cupboard man, who believes in his teeth and those of the world. "An animal with bad manners and too much time on its hands." - "Both," muttered the lens polisher, and it wasn't an attempt at being nice. "Someone taught a machine how to breathe, and now it's practicing on us." The boatswain tugged on a rope that was none of his business, just to show the world that it could still do what it was taught.

"No private interpretations on duty," the officer tried, and even the air seemed to grow moss on this sentence. "We'll stick to procedures." Procedure meant: wait, count, write, wait. And the buoy on the trestle by the workshop suddenly "pinged" quietly against the small rubber wedge, as if reminding us that we had just placed a piece of evidence on the plank and were acting as if it were furniture.

Conseil took the glass with the copper circle, unscrewed it slightly, let in some air like a joke, screwed it shut, moved it to another location, and noted the time. "If it's playing tricks on us, then do it politely," he said. "I'll note the politeness. Someday, someone will be rewarded for it." "Who?" asked the stoker. "The one who counts the glasses," Conseil answered, "or the one who produces them."

Ned stepped away from the bow, only two steps, and the way he walked was already a decision. He primed the harpoon, placed his hands on the shaft as if rehearsing a wordless prayer. "At the next open light," he said, calm as the weather, "I'll give it back to him. Not in the dark. Not nibbled. Clean, as clean as

he's cutting us." The officer looked past him as if the world behind Ned had just promised something he couldn't accept. "No cast without orders," he reminded the man and the air. "Then give it," Ned said, not louder, just closer. We let them talk, because words are sometimes fuses and sometimes just wet wicks.

"The corridor is shifting," remarked the lookout, who had gotten into the habit of saying everything quietly so it wouldn't turn into a story. He was right. The line of buoys had taken on a tired sway, a smile for no reason. Not much, just enough for an untold joke. The oily film teased us once more with two tongues, drawing the bow back. I thought of the knife in the rope, the circle of holes in the bulwarks, the delicate abrasions on the steel. The world had decided to insult us politely.

"I want to hear voices, not superstition," the officer demanded, but still asked: "Who had rum before the night watch?" Three raised their hands, slowly, as if confessing taxes. Conseil nodded them off, without drama. "They're clean," he said. "If they see something, I'll see it too." - "And you?" the officer asked me abruptly, as if he wanted to turn me into evidence. "I'll drink later," I replied. "If I write the wrong things." He didn't like the answer, but it fit.

In the workshop, the mechanic lifted the lid of the buoy box. The felt compartment for the brass pins was complete—nine spaces filled, one empty, with no one standing by. "I could swear," he began, "that—" He trailed off, because a small detail is always the handle by which a lie can be pulled up. "Let them," Conseil advised. "If they count us, we'll count back, but we won't pretend we already know why the total is correct."

The bell began to ring for a full blast; its tone was hoarse, having swallowed too much meaning today. It had barely faded away when the knock answered, flawless, punctual, like a civil servant in a suit. I felt it not just in my jaw; this time it ran down the inside of my arm, three short, two long, three short, as if someone had laid a thin wire beneath my skin. I looked at Ned. He didn't look at me. But he knew because his grip on the shaft kept the same rhythm, for a second, then released. Habits take away men's fear. Codes give it back.

"Broom," someone whispered, maybe me, maybe the side of the ship. The mechanic let the beam breathe again. Not far, not long. A kiss with light. At the exact moment the cone passed over Buoy Five, something lifted beneath the skin of the sea, not a heave, just a resolve. A gray back—if back is the right word for a shape that only pretends to be round—bulged a fraction. On the back, a dull surface that insulted every other surface I knew: varnished, clean, with a narrow scar that didn't boast. The lens grew thin over it, so thin that the

light burned my tongue. "Off," said the officer, and this time it wasn't just an order, it was a request.

After the exit, something remained: a shadow too straight to be water, too alive to remain mere iron, dissolving before a brain could latch onto it. The compass took a small step to the side and returned as if apologizing. The boatswain casually spat over his shoulder, missed the plank on principle, and struck the sea on purpose. "So she knows we're still here," he muttered. That was his theology.

"Entry," demanded the officer, paler than before: "Visual contact unclear. No danger. Maintain course." The payboy wrote "unclear" and made the period after it so small it sounded more like a question. The men spoke more quietly. Rum as an explanation was becoming thin. Evidence was gathering like dust in a closed chamber.

Then came the kind of silence that ends nothing, but opens a new one. Conseil closed his notebook. The mechanic put the tin bowl away. The stoker placed his hand on the pipe as if it were a sleeping animal. Ned raised the harpoon five fingers' width and put it down again. The officer finally lit his pipe—once, twice, the flame hissed, went out, hissed again, as if it knew that today, no stories could be pulled out of its smoke.

I put my hand in my pocket, not to seek courage, just out of habit. There lay the ring made of foreign fiber, which I had woken up yesterday in the same pocket and put back to sleep—only it wasn't alone. A second one lay next to it. Identical? No. This second one was struck twice, as if someone had remembered that politeness works better in pairs. Both dry. Both cold, as if they had never seen the sea. I took the new one in my hand, hid my fingers, pretended to yawn. It fit loosely around my thumb. I slid it off, and it stuck to my skin for a heartbeat, even though there was no salt there to stick. Then it fell into my palm, as if pleased to have arrived.

I looked at Conseil. He saw me, looked away, and that was his "Give it to me later." I put the ring back, and when I pulled my hand out of my pocket, there was a third one there, very thin, barely noticeable, nestled around the button on the inside of my coat. I didn't undo it. Some gifts have to be left where they claim to be useful.

"Change of the watch," barked the bell, losing a second in the process. The freshmen lined up, looked at Buoy Five, which stood an inch from the line and acted as if it had always been there. The officer repeated the liturgy again:

"Hold course. No light without a broom. No cast without an order. No theories." Ned tightened the harpoon, which in his language means agreement to nothing. The boatswain nodded too much, which in his language means he is thinking a sin. The stoker pretended to believe in valves, because you have to believe in something when holes in a ship's sides become circular.

The sun tried to craft a day out of the gray, but found only working light. The oily film outside deepened the arch, like a smile one reluctantly returns. I placed the cup on the plank. It didn't vibrate the polite code. That was happening in other places now: in the copper circle in the glass, which clinked gently without cracking; in the edge of the hole, which remained warm even as the wind grew naughty; in the wood beneath my hand, which recognized the foreign rhythm and refused to shake it off.

"Routine," said the officer, as if trying to save the word for today. We nodded to him, giving him an alibi. Ned looked at the edge of the corridor as if he were having it signed. Conseil pushed the glass an inch further, wrote one time next to another, and drew a small, thin line underneath it that looked like a scar. The mechanic put the tin bowl away carefully, and I realized he liked the sound courtesies made when they touched metal. The boatswain tied a knot that no one needed, because sometimes you have to tie something to keep it from breaking.

I felt in my pocket for the rings. I felt two. The third—the one on the button—remained where it had been signed. I left it. You confuse opponents by pretending you already know the rules. Something clicked behind my teeth. No longer like fear. More like a meeting about to begin.

The buoys outside snapped to attention. The corridor curled into a smile that no one had ordered, but which nevertheless stuck. The sea acted as if it didn't care about us. Below us, someone continued to count, patience in time, three short, two long, three short. I thought: If it wants to talk, we're already the answer. And I also thought: At the next light, you'll cast, Ned, and I'll watch without blinking. The day didn't nod. It only showed us how to grow grayer without growing old.

Before we separated, the small thing happened that sows stories: the oil film parted, forming the arch even more sharply, and in the faint reflection of the thin sun, for a single breath, there lay something that looked like writing, very small, very polite strokes. I couldn't read them. I only knew it was for us. I put my hand in my pocket, felt the cold ring, the second one, and next to it—inexplicably, indecently—a brass pen, smooth, flush, without a flaw. My pen.

The one I had put away that morning. It was with me again, without a path, without a sound. I left it there. Some things are answered by not answering.

"On duty," said the officer, and we left. Ned stayed at the bow, the harpoon like a silent promise. Conseil smoothed an invisible crease in his notebook with his thumb. The bosun taut a net that didn't need to be taut. The stoker stroked the pipe. The mechanic locked the drawer with the glasses without looking. I put my hand on wood. The cold wrote with its finger along the side of the ship again. And somewhere below us, someone was waiting for one of us to laugh. We didn't. We clung to steel, lists, courage on credit—and to the new rule that no one uttered: When politeness cuts, cut back. In full light.

The damned Nautilus

The afternoon never came; it crept out of the gray like a bill no one wants to open, but everyone knows about. The sea lay flat, as if it had a hangover and the dignity not to admit it. The air tasted not of salt, but of polish, of a workshop in a Sunday shirt. Out there, between four and five, our corridor stood so perfectly arranged that it could have been hung on the wall and scrutinized. The buoys nodded politely. The oily film settled again into that strange smile that pretended to know something about us we were repressing. We stood in our places, out of old fear and new habit: the officer with his log paternoster, Ned at the bow, the harpoon casually tucked into his coat like a threatening letter, the boatswain at the knots, the mechanic by his sledge, the tin bowl in his arm like a museum of insubordination, the lens polisher too close to reality, the stoker with his hand on the pipe, Conseil half hospital, half court clerk, and me somewhere in between, my tongue metal and my eyes on the corridor.

"Broom," the bridge allowed with the politeness with which one tolerates a backyard smoker's last cigarette. The mechanic pulled the cloth a finger's width, and the click jumped into my jaw like a reliable reprimand. The finger of light slid out, flat, respectful, not a hero, more like an accountant with a lamp. Over Buoy Four, who remained well-behaved, over Five, who acted a bit proud of her neat circular chip, and then, over the spot where "Invitation" had been written for days, the beam grew thin. Not flickering, not weak—thin, like a wire made of light, carefully moving over varnish. Beneath it was something that didn't have to play water to be water: a matte surface that took the light as if it belonged to it and gave it back as if it were pure politeness. I saw a line,

straight, modest, not a shipyard pose; more like a scar that had learned not to show off. Panel joint, my head said. Weld seam, whispered the memory of glass and spirit in Conseil's cupboard. "Out," said the officer, too quickly, like someone who's put his eyes on a diet. The beam obeyed with relief.

The corridor remained a corridor; the oily film briefly pulled its two tongues apart, as if practicing a word that didn't fit into our language, then closed again, as if it had changed its mind. The wind showed decency and left us alone with our thoughts. "Routine," murmured the officer, as if it were a spell against visible facts. The paymaster wrote it down, his pen as stiff as his back. Ned said nothing. His shoulders spoke: not today in the shadows, today in the light. The boatswain ran his thumb and the tip of his hand over a rope that would never again be innocent. The mechanic pulled another polite, thin ribbon from under the lamp post, black, flat, dry as mockery, and placed it with the others. Conseil merely nodded, as if putting a notch in the forehead of the world.

We waited, and waiting at sea is a craft: knees learn the song of the planks, eyes the audacity of wanting to see only one thing, breath the art of not becoming embarrassed. The polite drone from below was back, not loud, not aggressive, just reliable, like someone who always rings the bell on time to ask for the flowers. Beneath its beat, the honest engine, our pious one. Two tones that didn't want to mix, but could live side by side. I put my hand on the side of the ship. Our vibration: good. Below, the other: patient, not in time with the sea, in time with intention. Someone was counting us. Maybe someone was just scrubbing us through their memory.

"No superstition on duty," the officer said to the air, which took the word and placed it on the plank so no one would trip. The lookout held up two fingers, not dramatically, just honestly. "Area," he said. "Like before. Shorter. Closer." His voice was the kind of knife that doesn't cut because it only points. The mechanic blinked the lens open again, and we all stared like debtors at a bank statement. The beam passed over the same spot again, and again it became thread-thin, over a curve that had something of a back and yet no animal can make without appearing offended. I swore I saw two parallel lines of shadow under the skin that didn't want to be water. "Out," said the officer, and the light acted as if it were great to be blind again.

The men didn't speak. Words in such moments are like knives in too large hands. The stoker cleared a set of valves and left them there. The boatswain flicked the anger from his fingers by not tying anything. Ned scratched an old notch on the shaft with his thumb and stopped before memory made him ridiculous. Conseil stepped up beside me, sniffed the air briefly like a dog in

another life, and nodded again, that little nod that says: Yes, it smells of a workshop and of someone who considers rust an insult. "When water gets so quiet," he murmured, "someone has already spoken to it."

We kept our eyes open until our eyes were offended. And then the sea acted as if it were fed up with us: It contracted a breath in one spot, right on the line between the buoys, didn't lift a ridge, only made something a little more curved than the rest, and right there, gossamer, stood this mist that doesn't breathe and yet calls out "breath." No bubbles, no animal noise, just the polite cheekiness of a membrane briefly kissing the surface. The officer raised his hand. "No light." The mechanic had long since released the handle. Even my jaw held its breath.

I felt the planks beneath my feet change their tune. Not a jolt, not a shock. More like a doctor's grip on a rib: alive? Yes. I felt it in the wood, then in my fingertips, and then there was silence again, not the old silence, just a newly varnished one.

"Check the buoys?" The boatswain was polite to block out his anger. "No," the officer decided, "we're observing." Observing is a big word for standing still. So we stood still, and the sea acted as if it had the stage to itself. In the corner of my eye, I saw the buoy by the workshop—the one that had been placed on board for us yesterday like a well-bred insult—turn its head ever so slightly. Not roll. Turn. The rubber wedge didn't squeak. The buoy stopped as if it were ashamed of its good breeding.

"Do you hear that?" The lookout didn't even have to ask. It came back, that sound that shouldn't have been one, the politeness in beats that make your teeth count: clop-clop-clop, clop—clop, clop-clop-clop. This time, not just in the hull. This time, the buoy on the trestle answered in the same rhythm, only brighter, thinner, as if a small metal heart had been built into its belly and had learned to nod. The hull made the deep voice, the buoy the bright one. Together, they formed a duet that wound us up in the middle.

The officer did what officers do when the world gets too polite: He retreated to his paper. "Nothing special," he dictated, as if one sentence could stop his ears. The payboy dipped too deeply, and the dot at the end looked as if he had cufflinks on it. Ned didn't laugh, but his shoulders dropped a finger. The mechanic gripped the tin bowl more tightly, as if inside it were a child just learning to walk, with nothing but nonsense on its mind. Conseil took half a step forward, no more. "If it speaks," he said, "it's always after the bell has rung. So we ring." The officer pursed his lips, then rang the bell: an honest,

tired note, which at sea is called "time." And immediately afterward, like an official punching in on time: three short, two long, three short, from his stomach and from the buoy, simultaneously, as if it were prearranged. I felt it not only in my jaw. It ran up my palm, into my tendon, into my shoulder. A polite stream.

"Broom," whispered the lens polisher, placing the request under his breath as if it were meant to hurt no one. The mechanic obeyed without command, half a crack of cloth, the click like a nail in my gums, the beam just above the skin of the sea, flat as a knife that only points. The dull surface was there, closer than before, the wire of light passed over it, and I saw the scar—not large, not proud, a stitch made by someone who doesn't want it talked about. Not an accident, not a whim. A panel joint. Perspiration. Beneath the patina. "Off," pressed the officer, and the light obeyed, perhaps out of decency, perhaps out of fear.

We exhaled simultaneously; that's the annoying thing about teams: you share the stupid things and the oxygen. The corridor outside made the smiles even more crooked; the two oil-tongues kissed, then separated, as if they were teasing us. The wind didn't move. The engine continued to hum obediently. The other one continued to hum like someone who wants to finish in peace.

"If that's an animal, I'll eat my knot plan," the boatswain said quietly. "And if it's a machine, it'll eat it for you," Ned muttered back, his eyes never leaving the water. Conseil pushed the lamp toward me, the small, concealed one. "Not outside," he warned. I held it against my palm to check if I had any paint left. I did. It was called "gray."

I leaned over the side of the boat, not crazy, just curious. Where the scar had slept, the water was smoother than the rest. Smooth, as if someone had just ironed it and forgotten to turn off the steam. No sound to pay for the courage. Only silent scorn. I stepped back again, because you don't want the sea to look you in the face when it's caught lying.

"Hold course," said the officer, and I suddenly understood him: You stay course so you don't have to admit you're being pulled. "No light without a broom. No throw without—" He left the sentence open because the end was already in Ned's hands for all of us. Ned flicked his thumb at a notch. Once. Enough.

The bell took the next half-truth, placed it next to the previous one, and in the gap between them came our duet again: the deep hull, the bright buoy, 3-2-3, exact, even, like two clocks that have learned to live together. The paymaster

wrote "routine," as if to save the word. The mechanic raised the bowl, as if to give the sound a home. The bosun stroked the ball of his hand over yesterday's bulwark hole; it was still warm. Not hot. Warm, like a hand through metal. "Not normal," he said, and his tone finally lent weight to the sentence.

I put my hand in my pocket, for no reason, and found a reason: the small fiber ring, dry, cold, ridiculously neat. Next to it, inexplicably, was the brass pin I'd returned to the felt compartment this morning, smooth, flush, without a dent. I left both there. There are days when you answer the mail by stacking it. The buoy on the trestle pinged again, gently, as if it were thanking me for the chance to play along. The hull tapped back in a friendly manner. Three short, two long, three short. The officer pretended he hadn't heard. We pretended to believe him.

The sea lay still again, like an excuse. The corridor remained. The two tongues of oil brushed over each other impatiently, like teeth in a stranger's mouth. The finger of light slept. Our jaw clicked the echo. And somewhere beneath us lay something that didn't have to wait, and yet waited—with manners.

It didn't come as an event, but rather as a polite mistake. First the shadow, then the quiet*tok*against the edge of the boat, so quietly that you could mistake it for a guilty conscience. When we looked, it was already there: one of our buoys, not out in the row, not swinging on the line, but neatly at the railing, where only hands put things down. The varnish gleamed, but not with salt; it was that dry shine that smells of a workbench. On the shaft hung a knot of the thin, black fiber material that has discouraged us from respecting it for days: no random bulge, no rushed "Hold on," but a carefully placed double ring, as if someone had left us a business card and written the name in extra small letters.

No one made a show of it. The boatswain went first, examining with his eyes as if fingers would offend. "This isn't ours," he said, and his voice had that reluctantly tender note that men get when they have to appreciate art that hates it. The mechanic knelt beside him, the tin bowl already in his hand as if by reflex. He ran the tip over the edge of the knot, not pressing, measuring. The band was dry, too dry. As dry as metal that has only known the air after someone has filtered it. "No salt," he murmured. "No dirt." He lifted the end, and it didn't fall. It stuck to his finger, for a second, as if a faint will had been left there, one that needs no name.

The officer arrived, his face stiff, because a soft face loses the crew. "Inspection," he said, as if it were a customs office. "No superstition." The

paymaster was already standing there with notebook and pen, the ink heavy at the tip, his hand too tame. "Entry?" he asked almost kindly. No one gave him one he liked.

We lifted the buoy onto the trestle, where it had sung its pleasantries to us yesterday. The metal sounded correct, not insulted, not proud. At the clasp: a brass pin, exactly the type we had been missing from the felt compartment that morning. Neatly inserted, flush, without a dent. The boatswain pressed it with his thumb, just to show the universe that we were still deciding something. The pin gave that small, self-satisfied*click*, which things do when they've understood their purpose. I discreetly felt in my coat pocket—yes, mine was still lying where I didn't want it anymore. It felt like a memory that had just decided to become true again.

"Corridor outside still counts nine?" Ned asked, without having to move. The lookout nodded, his hand halfway in the air, as if about to swear. "Nine. Keep your distance. Four and five with that..."—he searched briefly—"look." The oily film outside played its smile again, two tongues tugging at the corners of the mouth. If the sea ever had a sense of humor, this is the one that hurts.

Conseil emerged from the sick roll, spirit glass in his left hand, labels in his right, the look with which one treats wounds and truths equally. "Don't touch," he said to the boatswain, who acted as if he had never had the idea. Conseil lifted the knot with tweezers, slowly, as if taking a knife from a child. The ribbon didn't flex, it obeyed. He let it sink into the spirit. No bubbles, no anger. "Evidence," he said matter-of-factly, and there was room in his voice for "A" and "B" and "C." Next to it, almost tenderly, he placed a second brass pin—mine? Another one?—which made the slightest sound on the bottom of the glass.*tok*left behind, like a signature that doesn't want to show off.

The mechanic ran a rag under the eyelets, pulled it out, and smelled it. "Polish," he said. "Not ours." And on the side of the buoy, a hand's breadth below the shaft, there was a circle of dryness—no residue, no flag, a clean, ridiculous halo that felt as if someone had forbidden the sea there to be wet. Conseil laid the rag over it: it stayed clean. "Cover," he whispered. "Or mouth." Sometimes his humor was worse than ours.

The officer donned his authority like a thin jacket. "Log," he ordered, and the payboy wrote: "A buoy was taken on deck. Examination found nothing." I could see the lie in his face and liked him more at that moment because he was bad at it. He raised his pen, waiting for "anything special," and the officer said "none," so smoothly that I felt cold.

The buoy answered itself. A low, bright note from its belly, barely more than an idea of sound, and yet there it was: klop—klop—klop, klop——klop, klop—klop—klop. The same polite greeting that the hull gave in its deep throat, only now as a metallic whisper on our trestle. The boatswain held his breath, as if someone had just told him a truth about his knots. The officer didn't dare look, as if a look might convert him. "Material tension," the stoker explained dutifully, and his voice begged that he might not be punished for it.

"Deck," said the mechanic, realizing that wasn't a sentence, and lifted the buoy by the base as if he wanted to hear what it was hiding. A thin, pale green smear trailed from the shaft to the paint, barely more than a visible breath. It smelled of solvent, of a warm workshop, of a place that never rusts and takes offense when it's mentioned. Ned raised an eyebrow. "No fish," he said, not because anyone had objected, but because some sentences are designed to keep other sentences at bay.

The boatswain didn't untie the double ring. He looked at it, turned it half a turn with his bare fingertips, and cursed softly, so softly that only Guilt heard it. "Sight knot," he muttered, a foreign word in a mouth built for nautical language. "Whoever that is out there has hand training." He fetched needles, not knives. He worked the ribbon apart without hurting himself, and each fiber lay where it should. When the ring was thread again, it was still dry, still fresh, as if the wind had just—, no. Nobody said wind.

"Why back?" asked the lens polisher, who had by now realized that you don't get answers by shouting questions into the air. "Because he likes order," said Conseil. "And because he wants us to know that he knows what our order is." He shoved the glass into the cabinet, next to it the others: the copper circle, the fiber bundle, the brass pin, the ring. Small, neat trinkets that feel at home in the collection of a man who crunches numbers when others swear.

Outside, the line was still standing, as if it had been watching the whole time. Buoy Five, the one with the circular chip on its edge, turned a touch, so politely that only those who had been staring at the wrong things for too long saw it. The film of oil deepened the smile, pulled it crooked, then loosened it again. The wind remained absent, the engine did its honest best, the other one droned on quietly, as if nodding to our little museum.

"Origin?" asked the officer, helplessly overcorrect. "Go to the bridge," advised the boatswain without rank, "and check the list of wonders." This was bold enough that he doffed his cap afterward, as if he hadn't meant it. The officer acted as if he hadn't heard. "Corridor unchanged?" The lookout: "Unchanged

and yet different." He pointed to the spot between four and five, where the surface was smoother than smooth.

"Broom," the bridge again let mercy prevail over reason. The cloth lifted a crack, the lens blinked, the click nailed politeness into my jaw, and the beam brushed over where we'd long known the skin didn't stay water. It became thin, insultingly thin, and on the matte surface beneath it, for exactly one breath, a shadow moved across, straight, not an animal, not a wave. A panel edge. A scar that didn't belong to us. "Off," said the officer, and the light was glad to know nothing again.

The buoy on the trestle pinged again, a mere sound that refused to forget its manners. Conseil noted the time, placed the watch next to the glass, and drew a small line. The paymaster wrote "routine" in his notebook and made the dot after it so small that he was ashamed of himself. Ned stretched his fingers once, as if clarifying something with them. The mechanic pushed the familiar threads back together under the sled, and where yesterday it had read "from the wind," there was now nothing. This is what insight looks like when it's poor.

"Do you see that?" whispered the lens polisher. On the buoy, right where the dry spot was, a drop of condensation ran from the bottom to the top. Slowly. Determinedly. It reached the edge, stopped as if considering whether to jump, and disappeared. The bosun blinked as if someone had thrown sand in his eyes. "Physics," said the stoker reflexively. "Or theater," corrected Ned.

The officer gathered courage in paper form. "Test completed. Back in the water." The boatswain lifted the buoy, just an inch, and in that inch it vibrated the polite pattern: three short, two long, three short. He put it down again as if he'd touched a hot plate and looked at the officer as if testing whether a uniform could be vented. "All right," the officer said, so slowly that each letter could be seen. "She'll stay here. Until—" He broke off because "until" was too big a word today.

We spread out because distribution plays a role in safety. The corridor lay before us, like a trace of chalk on a dark floor. The buoys outside nodded, the one inside was silent, the hull below was not. The polite drone wasn't louder, just closer, as if someone had put their ear under our wood to hear our thoughts. I put my hand in my coat pocket and found, instead of my warm, bad decision, a cold, ridiculously neat fiber ring that I hadn't put there. It was double-wrapped, the ends clean, the surface as dry as a threat. I twirled it between my fingers. It caught on my skin once, without salt, without sweat. Then it fell, obediently, into my palm.

"Give it here," Conseil said, as if he were in my head. I didn't put it away, because you lose things more quickly when you hide them. I placed it in his open hand, and the moment the ring hit his glass, the buoy on the trestle tapped out the pattern, the hull responded, and way back, at the very end of patience, the bell on the mast dropped a note that looked random and wasn't. Three short, two long, three short. Three voices, one sentence.

The officer turned his head toward the bridge as if he would find a cure there. "Hold course," he said, "and no interpretations on duty." That was the price for staying. We gave it to him because at sea you also feel sorry for your superiors. Ned slid the harpoon forward an inch and back again, as if practicing a salute that would make sense later. The boatswain tightened the knot on his cap, the mechanic stroked the tin shell as if he felt sorry for the metal that was still to go into it. The lens polisher placed his hands flat on the wood and watched his nails to see if they were lying. Conseil wrote another time on his tag, drew a line that looked as if it wanted to become a scar.

Before the half-glass came, something unseemly happened that now follows us like a pet: The buoy leaning against the railing turned half an inch against the ship's motion and stopped with its dry end facing the corridor. No wind. No hand. Just manners. We did what you do when reality begins to dominate pleasantries: We looked, didn't nod, and didn't write anything down, while our jaws counted the clicks as if money were at stake.

It wasn't a push, more of a polite nudge, like a neighbor asking if you're still there. The ship slid half a finger's breadth sideways, nothing worth telling stories about, everything worth nerves. The coffee pot in the galley took a little stroll, stopping at a bulkhead as if it had just received a good lesson. The helmsman held the course with two strokes of the rudder, the sea pretending to nod. The compass jerked—a brief whim—found itself, and pretended to be bored. "Cross sea," said the officer, as one would say a band-aid. The stoker put his hand to the pipe and shook his head, the reliable church in human form. "Our engine doesn't play jokes."

We weren't standing closer together, we were getting closer. The corridor outside—that tailor-made passage between Four and Five—suddenly took on a stance. The buoys lay like teeth in a mouth that decides to smile, for no reason at all. The oily film parted into two tongues, reshaping the curve as if practicing signatures. "Broom," the bridge allowed, because sometimes you need light to calibrate a lie. The canvas lifted a crack, the click jumped into my jaw, reliable as guilt, and the beam went out, a thin finger politely stroking the skin of the sea. Where our passage begins, it became thread-thin again, and beneath it lay

no whim: a dull surface, curved just enough to suggest backs, with a narrow, modest seam that doesn't boast. "Out," the officer said, too quickly, as if his gaze had just gone against the rules.

Then came the grip that didn't want to be one: no jerk, no crash, more like a hand under the ship, lifting us an inch into the corridor, as if adjusting a plank to make it flush. The helmsman countered the rudder, the rose took an offended step, and returned, obedient as a dog that knows this isn't its hour. "Line?" murmured the bosun, and everyone knew he meant one without material. "No," said the mechanic, and in his eyes was that clean anger of people who believe in facts. "Pressure."

The polite drone beneath the keel—our second pulse—moved an inch closer. Not louder, just more decisive. I placed my hand on the side of the ship, wood gave back truth: our own honest hum, beneath the other, the rhythm with patience, not sea, intent. Three short, two long, three short, as if someone wanted to check if we were still counting. The bell was silent, the hull answered nonetheless. "No superstition on duty," the officer reminded, his voice so smooth it could almost have slipped through the deck. Conseil nodded, not to him, to the sentence, and noted the time, in small print, as if no one was allowed to see it.

"Port amidships," the lens polisher suddenly called, not loudly, just with complete confidence. We turned our heads, too late for drama, but in time for the truth. At knee height in the bulwarks, something gleamed that simply shouldn't: a clean, rounded edge where sheet metal had once been. No burrs, no rust, no splinters. A hole so precise, as if someone had decided to carve decency into the geometry.*pop*came a heartbeat later—soft, polite—and a copper core fell onto the plank, circular, no larger than an old coin, warm, even though the wind finally remembered it existed. It didn't roll. It spun. Slowly, as if a tiny map were hidden within it, it came to a stop—with an invisible marker pointing toward the corridor.

"Flotsam," said the officer, to himself, to his paper, to a world that didn't want to be that today. The boatswain lifted the circle, weighed it, and smelled it. "Flotsam needs a file, not a workbench," he grumbled. He placed the edge on his thumbnail: not a tooth, not a gnat. The mechanic took it from him, as gently as one would hate, and laid it flat. "Not a burr inside," he reported after peering through the lamp into the hole. "Clean as freshly sucked. Whoever this is, he's doing it from the outside and apologizing for the mess."

"Log," demanded the officer, furious at the only thing that obeyed him. The payboy wrote "Loss of material on the bulwark; cause: collision," and the period at the end looked as if he had too much self-respect. Ned stood at the bow and didn't move. His breath changed the air a touch; that was his comment. "Don't throw," he told himself, and I believed him. For the moment.

Conseil emerged from his belly-in-belly, spirit glass in one hand, labels in the other, the smell of iodine and patience in the air. "Give it here," he didn't demand, he gathered it. He let the copper circle sink into the clear liquid; no bubbling, no protest, it lay just as if it had been written there in the contract. "Exhibit C," he murmured, the writing neat and narrow, date, time, place. Next to it: the previous circle, the fiber ring, the brass pin, the little courtesies that felt at home in his drawer.

"Warmth?" asked the boatswain, holding his fingers to the new edge of the hole. He twitched. "Like a hand from the other side." The lens polisher repeated the test with two fingertips, not cursing, just breathing. "Warm," he confirmed, and his mouth suddenly felt very old. "We'll seal it," the officer ordered reflexively. "With what?" asked the mechanic politely. "With regulations?" It remained quiet enough that the polite drone could be counted.

We took a breath for the next contradiction, when the ship gave way another centimeter – not under us, but*with*us. A controlled drift, as if someone had placed a soft rein on the keel and was guiding us into the middle of the gangway. The helmsman counter-ruddered, the helmsman acted as if it were appropriate, yet lost respect for two strokes. "It's carrying us," Conseil said, and it didn't sound romantic.

"Broom," came more quietly than usual from the bridge, as if someone didn't want to subject the light to what it would see. The beam was immediately thin, a wire over a surface that no longer needed an excuse. I saw clearly now: panel edges, not much, just enough to force the mind to think "built." A weld, no shipyard pose, a spare bulge, as if from a hand that prefers solving problems to telling stories. The light wire wandered, and each time it passed over the seam, it became a shade paler, as if someone were politely drinking so as not to offend us. "Out," whispered the officer, and I didn't know to whom he was sending the request.

The bell struck half-gavel. Exactly after that: klop-klop-klop, klop—klop, klop-klop-klop. The hull answered itself, the buoy on the trestle imitating in a brighter voice. The paymaster looked pleadingly at the officer, as if he could introduce a new mode of operation for the world. "Special features: none," the

officer dictated with a calmness that builds bridges beneath which there is only water. The paymaster wrote the word, but the "k" leaned to the left, as if ashamed.

"There's something hanging off the lamp shaft again," reported the mechanic, and very carefully, with tweezers, he pulled a narrow ribbon out from under the bearing. Black, flat, dry, the ends clean, folded into a small, stern fold. He placed it in its tin bowl, and the tin responded with the quiet laughter of things that are right. The boatswain watched as one watches at a funeral where the wrong person is being praised. "This isn't sea," he said. "This is school."

The men stood still, because movement would be a confession. The stoker muttered something about valves, let it die. Ned slid the harpoon forward and back two fingers, his way of reminding the body of the mind. Conseil checked the crew's pulse—pupils, hands, chins—and concluded that everyone was sober enough to bear the truth. "If that thing down there has any sense of humor," he said, "it's clean. Cleaner than ours."

We itched to do something. So we did nothing. And while we did nothing, something else was working. Our bow inched another inch into the corridor, no more, no less. The buoys stood outside as if interceding. The oily film darkened his smile a fraction. The officer raised his hand, lowered it, searched for orders, found paper. "Hold course," he said stubbornly. "No maneuvers without instructions." It sounded like a prayer that had lost its god.

The lens polisher knelt again by the bulwark, where the hole had freshly been made. "Still warm," he said. "No warmer." He applied the earlobe test to the edge, that silly trick that has saved more rope for centuries than any theorem. "Constant," he murmured. "Someone holds out their hand and doesn't take it away." I felt it in my teeth, that polite counting, and in my wrist, as if a line ran there that was never ordered.

"Counting buoys!" The officer clung to math. "Nine out," reported the lookout. "One in," added the stoker, glancing toward the workshop. The internal buoy turned half a degree at that precise moment and, dry-eyed, headed directly toward the corridor. "That was wind," no one else said. Ned coughed away a laugh that never came.

Something flickered at the edge of my vision, so small that it would later be called an invention. On the water, exactly in the middle of the corridor, a rectangular darkness stood for a moment, as if someone were pressing a shield under the skin. No word, just form. The beam was asleep; we had nothing with

which to aid reason. The darkness receded again, as if it were reluctant to stay. The compass twitched once more, apologized, found the line. The ship rested, as if resting exactly where it had been shown the place.

"Double watch remains," the officer decided hollowly. "No throw, no light, no—" He broke off because the third "no" turned on him. "—no comment," he concluded, and at least he won that. The boatswain grazed the edge of the hole with his knuckle, not loving what he felt. "If he wants us," he said quietly, "he'll take us without offending the sea." "Then we won't let ourselves be polished," I replied. It was cheap bravado. You take what you've got.

The bell breathed a full bell. Immediately afterward—more punctually than any church service—the code answered, deep and bright, in the wood, in the metal, in my jaw: three short, two long, three short. Conseil drew a line under his last time, straight, fine, which would one day look like a scar. The mechanic put the tin bowl down as if putting a child to sleep. Ned blinked slowly, as if his eyes had decided to remember all this for later.

Before we returned to our statues, the small act of indecency that orders the days occurred: From the fresh hole in the bulwark, a wisp of steam rose—not smoke, not mist, more like the breath of a bottle opened with the warmth of your hand. It lasted a second, maybe two, disappeared without a trace, leaving the rim just as warm as before. Conseil sniffed, smelled nothing, wrote "Steam?" in his notebook with question marks so small it barely existed. The copper circle in the glass tipped over, without water, without air, and lay back down—with its invisible mark exactly facing the corridor. We watched, did nothing, and the depth continued to count.

At some point, waiting turns into stupidity, and that's exactly when Ned stood up. No trumpet blast, no heroic poem. He took two steps forward, to where wood begins to believe in water, raised the harpoon as calmly as if it were a tool and not an opinion, and said simply: "In the light."

The officer already had the prohibition in his mouth; it sounded like a cold spoon against his teeth. "No throw—" He didn't make it to the end. The bridge threw mercy in our direction. "Broom short," came the polite reply, as if asking to be heard at a closed door. The mechanic pushed the cloth a finger's breadth, and the click jumped into my jaw like a notary arriving early for an appointment. The thread of light slid out flat, over Buoy Four, over Five, and then, in the middle of the corridor, it became thread-thin. Beneath it lay that dull curve, the window without a house, the seam like a confession without pathos.

"Now," said Ned—not loudly, but the air acted as if it had given the command. He started. No fuss. The shaft lay in his hand like a sentence about to be sent. One breath, the hip added weight, and the iron went. No "attention," no drumming. It flew with the sound wood makes when it's working today. The beam remained open so everyone could watch our rules grow old as they watched.

What came back had no story to it: no blood, no howling, no animal. A metallic*tunk*, small, obscenely matter-of-fact, as if someone had knocked on a blackboard where everything was already written. The rope didn't sing like a rope, it sang like a string, taut by a hand that wasn't ours. A half-tug, polite. The lens polisher held on, as Ned had taught him, with only two fingers. "If it pulls, let go," Ned had said; he didn't let go. And he got a lesson.

The*ritsch*There was no tearing, it was a clean cut. An edge so smooth that light slipped along it. The cut was two hand-widths behind the ring. The boy took a step that wasn't one; I already had his collar, Conseil mine. The boatswain grasped reality and hauled us back to the side with names. The line suddenly hung innocently, and the harpoon acted as if nothing had ever happened.

"No one overboard!" the officer yelled, as if that were the punchline. The payboy wrestled with the word "miss" and wrote it as if ashamed of the ink. Ned stood where he stood, his breathing his only entertainment. "Retrieve," he said quietly, and we retrieved.

The tip came, slowly, diplomatically. No glory clung to it, only work. On the steel sat fine flakes of something that shouldn't have been flakes: greenish grit, dry, brittle, like paint aging on warm metal. A hint of solvent, that pharmacy smell that briefly numbs tongues. The mechanic sniffed and nodded, as if he'd seen the name in a catalog before. "Primer," he murmured. "No sea."

Ned wiped the steel, carefully, as if one could accept a statement without offending it. "Barrel scratches differently," he said into the silence, purely out of politeness to any false explanations. Conseil held the lamp so the light didn't spill out; in the glow, we saw that between two of the fine scratches lay tiny, straight lines, parallel, too neat for teeth. Panel edge. Weld. We didn't nod, so as not to applaud the word.

"Entry: Practice. Cast. Result unclear," the officer dictated to the paper, and the paper took it, because paper is well-behaved. The boatswain picked up the cut end of the slack line, examined the edge that promised nothing, and pocketed

it like an offended handkerchief. "Clean," he said, and anyone who has ever loved a knot heard how much that word hurt him.

The polite drone below us shifted a fraction, not louder, just closer, as if someone had pulled their chair forward a bit under our table. The bell was silent, yet it went: clop-clop-clop, clop—clop, clop-clop-clop. The hull was deep, the buoy on the trestle bright—a duet that hadn't arranged itself yet was punctual. The thread of light was asleep, and the sea looked as if it wanted to run its tongue over its own surface.

"Another broom," no one demanded. The mechanic did it anyway. A narrow slit of cloth, a click in my jaw, the wiry beam over the same line. Just as the light wire crossed the seam again, a gray back rose beneath the skin, no larger than two men's widths, no vanity in it, only business. The lens became so thin I could taste it on my tongue. "Off," the officer said quickly, and the light was glad of any command that made it smaller.

The harpoon lay there again, as if it had never flown. We looked at it as if we wanted to take it to court. On the hook, where the handle meets steel, sat something no one had hung there: a narrow ring of the foreign fiber, wrapped twice, neatly, dry. Not a knot made out of necessity. A greeting. The mechanic picked it up with tweezers, placed it with the others in his tin bowl, and the metal gave that small, devastatingly polite laugh. The boatswain didn't say a word. He pressed his lips so tightly that his beard grated.

"No more throws without orders," the officer said belatedly, because laws always come too late when reality makes the law. Ned didn't nod. He looked at the corridor as if negotiating with a line. "At the next open light," he said, more to the water than to us, "I'll give it back to him. Clean. No secrets."

"Visual contact?" asked the helmsman out of duty. "Enough to sweat," Conseil replied dryly. He opened the glass in the sick roll a crack, let the air in like a bad joke, screwed it shut, placed the watch next to it, and wrote down the time. Then he held the rag to the harpoon tip and stroked slowly. The cloth was left with that fine, absurd green that isn't algae. He sniffed it. "Workshop," he said. "Not harbor. Cleaner."

Before we'd even sorted out our new silence, the buoy line outside shifted a fraction of an inch—not a current, more of an idea. Four and five shifted their distance a finger, as if someone were pulling on a ruler from below to center the corridor. The oily film deepened the smile, acting as if humor were mathematics. The machine hummed obediently, the other counted patiently:

three short, two long, three short. I noticed how I caught the rhythm in my wrist without having invited it.

"Collision with flotsam," the officer tried to tie his voice to something he knew. The boatswain placed the cut piece of rope in his palm. "Show me the branch that can do that," he said calmly. "I'll give it a medal." The officer stared at the smooth edge as if it were alerting him to his handwriting.

In the workshop, the buoy on the stand vibrated a single, delicate*ping*, as if she felt addressed. Her dry patch stood further toward the corridor, neater than a soldier. The mechanic pulled another ribbon of fiber from under the lamp holder—as if in mockery—shorter than a finger, taut, arranged in a minimalist stroke. He placed it with the others. The bowl sounded as if it had understood that it would be even fuller today.

"Deck steady," ordered the officer, and it was the best sentence he'd said in days. "No lights except brooms. No throwing." He didn't look at Ned, because some people are only commanded with their backs turned. Ned ran his thumb over the old notch on the shaft, once, exactly once, and let his hands hang as if the wood had become heavier.

The bell struggled through half a bell, hoarse with too much meaning. Exactly after that, the code responded, as if someone had finally signed the contract: the hull low, the buoy bright, 3-2-3, and somewhere in between, a new, barely audible knock from the direction of the lamp carriage, as if the beam itself had come to an opinion. Conseil drew another line in his notebook; when read later, it will look like a scar.

I put my hand in my coat pocket, not to seek comfort, but out of idiotic habit. The brass pin I'd put back that morning lay there again, smooth, cold, without a path, without a sound. Next to it was the doubled-up fiber ring, which no one had taken when it was taken. I didn't take anything out. Some answers are written by leaving them there.

At the fresh hole in the bulwark, a milky mist lingered for a moment, so polite that he apologized before disappearing. The edge remained warm; not from a foreign glow, but rather from the warmth of a hand through metal. The boatswain stroked it with the skin of his knuckles and acted as if he hadn't been startled. The helmsman gave a slight flick of the oar to escape the feeling of being led; the ship obeyed—and yet stayed exactly where the corridor wanted us to go.

"Protocol," demanded the officer, proud of the only thing left his. The payboy wrote, "Contact without damage. Procedure maintained." The period after that was as small as an excuse. We stood, doing nothing, breathing together because that's what crews do. The polite drone continued to count. Ned laid down the harpoon as if it were a promise to be kept from witnesses. "Next open light," he said again, under his breath. "Clean."

Outside, the oil film completed the arc and held it. The corridor lay like a hallway someone had imagined just like this. The finger of light slumbered. Our jaws clicked. And somewhere below us, someone was making a list of us, more orderly than we could ever make of him. We clung to steel, lists, courage on credit. The rest was politeness that cuts through.

It began with a shadow that offered no apologies. No crack, no foam collar. Just a dark curve next to the side of the boat, a hint of vapor like a bottle that's gotten too warm, and then the wood beneath our hands resounded like a door being politely tapped with a knuckle: clop-clop-clop, clop—clop, clop-clop-clop. Then something entered the picture that put any rum alibi in the closet: a diver.

Not the harbor version with its Sunday glow. This was armor on legs. The suit was dull, stained, thick as three promises; on his thigh, a knife that looked as if it would have liked to make friends, and on his helmet, a disk behind which there was no room for a face. A brooding breath escaped briefly from a small valve—not steam, more like a herbal whiff that insulted the air because it smelled so decent. He placed his feet against our skin as if they were stuck; no haste, just the calm of people who know what tools do when you listen to them.

"Get away from the edge," the officer said, sounding as if he were politely asking the sea to be someone else. We backed away a half step, more out of decency than fear. Ned didn't step back. He leaned against his harpoon like an old dog that wouldn't be set free these days, and watched as if the world had finally settled a score for him.

The diver raised his hand, his glove thick as a story no one believes, and tapped our bulwark, again those three, two, three—patience in tin. Then he placed his hand on the fresh hole that had just happened to us like a well-behaved theft. A second of nothing. Then he pulled his hand away, and the inside edge grew warmer, as if someone were pushing politeness through metal. The bosun withdrew his finger, didn't curse, just breathed: "Like a hand. From over there."

The diver turned his head, as if considering whether we were capable of learning. He pointed with two fingers into the corridor between four and five, that neat smile that hung out at sea, and made a gesture understood everywhere: Stay. Don't touch, don't leave. Stay. Then he leaned toward our net, stroked a spot no one needed, and in three or four movements, untied a knot that for days had been more about psychology than safety. He did it casually, with that cheeky care that comes from people who don't ask for permission.

"Broom," the lens polisher asked, much too quietly, and the mechanic made up for it by being rude. A sliver of cloth, the click nailed my jaw again, and the beam flickered flatly over the spot. We saw it in the light, no fairy tales, no whim: metal on skin, workbench underwater. There was no word on the tank. It didn't need one.

He tapped again, three, two, three, and then ran his hand over the buoy that had strolled obediently aboard yesterday. The sound coming from it was brighter than the one from our stomachs, but the sentence was the same. I suddenly felt like we were the idiot on the phone, saying "Hello?" even though the line was already connected.

The officer grabbed the report because people in uniform think paper is a kind of dinghy. "Contact," he finally said, the word slipping out of his mouth like a tooth. "Without..." – he searched for a band-aid – "aggression." The paymaster wrote it down, his pen trembling; it was too tired for that.

The diver, meanwhile, was as busy as a janitor with a sense of humor. He stuck two fingers under the lamp carriage, and when he pulled them out again, he held something that looked like our new favorite tape: black, flat, dry. He lifted it to us, just so no one could reach it, and then laid it—quite casually—on the railing. The mechanic needed no invitation. Tweezers, a tin bowl, the small laugh of metal. The diver shook his head, a slow movement that said: You collect, I work.

His knife? It was hanging from his leg, presumably glad he didn't have to tell any big stories today. He didn't use it. Instead, as if to show us that you can cut without it, he pulled on a redundant lanyard, made a tight cut—perfect logbook style—and released it again, more slowly than necessary, so we'd learn it, if we ever get the right to do it.

"That's the kind of politeness that wears ties," muttered the boatswain, his teeth sounding like sand. Ned nodded, not to him, to the sentence. "He likes

order," he said. "And he hates our mess, but not enough to send us to the bottom."

The air around the helmet smelled briefly of that herbal stuff again. He raised his hand, turning the back of it toward us—no grand gesture, just two fingers crossed briefly, as if someone were reminding the world that it isn't holy. The officer froze in a pose he took for dignity. Conseil stood beside him, smelling, counting, writing. The stoker whispered "valve," because if you can't pay for any miracle, you stuff it into a labeled cabinet.

Then something inconspicuous happened, something that horrified us more than any noise: the diver put his hand on the side of the boat, waited until we looked, and tapped a truth into one of our pockets. Not me, not Ned, not the bosun. The payboy. He was standing too close, the pen still in his hand, as if writing were a weapon. The glove didn't touch him. Nevertheless, the man reflexively reached for his jacket, ripped it open, and in the breast pocket lay—clean, smooth—a brass pen, correct type, flush, without a dent. It hadn't been there just a moment ago. It was there now. The payboy blanched in a way that couldn't be explained by the weather.

"Don't touch," Conseil said, but his voice came too late. The pen was already in the boy's hand, cool as a new lie. "In the glass," Conseil corrected himself. "With the date." The diver nodded—no mockery, no haste—turned his head back toward the corridor, and, almost tenderly, placed his palm against our skin, as if checking whether we still had a pulse.

"No more throws," the officer managed to say, even though no one had raised their arm. The diver then pointed at the harpoon, then at the sun, which today was nothing more than a working light, and slowly drew his finger from east to west, a narrow line across his helmet glass that meant "later." Ned understood him faster than I did. "In the open light," he said, half to us, half to the sea, as if it had ears.

The mechanic pushed the metal shell closer. Inside: two or three rings from the foreign band, a stern punch, a Turkish flag, the scuffs from the steel on a rag. The diver leaned forward—as far as he could—looked inside, raised his eyes, and if ever a helmet smiled, it was now. He tapped the rim with his glove, once, politely, and the metal laughed its little, offended laugh again.

"What does he want?" asked the stoker, not defiantly, just with the need for a verb. "That we hold the line," said Conseil, "and not waste the light." The bosun

ran his knuckle over the edge of the hole. "And that we tell it straight," he added. Tell it straight. As if this were a court of law.

The diver briefly pressed a valve, and again came that herbal breath. He held his hand to his chest, tapped himself once, twice, then repeated the same sequence on our hull. 3-2-3, like a signature on someone else's paper. I felt it in my jaw and wrist; at some point, the body becomes a membrane. Ned raised the harpoon two fingers high, lowered it again. The officer acted as if he were only seeing it all secondhand, over someone's shoulder.

"If he wants to talk, let him write," the officer pressed. The world had a sense of humor: For a fraction of a breath, that rectangle of darkness stood on the surface of the water in the corridor, as if someone were holding a sign beneath the surface. Not a word on it, just the idea of "name." The oil film parted its two tongues, as if forming the first letter. Then there was water again. The diver pointed at it, then at our bell, as if it were a mouth pleading for the full truth.

"Bell," said Conseil, and the officer had the grace not to argue. He rang. The sound rolled across the deck, into the planks, into his hands, which grew clammy. The diver answered, punctually like an official, tapped the response on the side of the ship, and the buoy on the trestle pinged in its bright register. Three voices, one sentence. I thought: It's nice when politeness connects.

Then the diver did something I found embarrassing. He took a loose "safety knot" on our net—that fig leaf for people who believe that too much grip protects against trouble—and pulled it so tight that it finally worked. He did this while pulling a tiny new piece of string from his pocket with his other hand, short, dry, just a finger long, and tied us—on the open sea, on our side—a flawless little decorative knot. No good. A comment. He left it hanging as if he'd just improved our handwriting.

"I hate him," the boatswain said quietly, and you could hear it was respect. Ned nodded again, using the face he usually uses to plan throws. "He brings order. But not ours." "Then we'll learn one that works," Conseil muttered, writing the time and the word "diver" on a line that would one day look like a scar.

The diver straightened himself, as far as such a suit allows, and made the gesture again: finger toward the corridor, hand down, stay. Then he ran his hand over the spot where our buoy was leaning against the boat. The dry patch on its varnish—that ridiculous halo that forbids salt—slipped a fraction. The buoy rotated, very slowly, without a wedge, until the patch was again—

exactly—facing the corridor. The glove raised two fingers, so barely that only people with sin saw it. Then it sank.

Not a splash. Not a wave showing off. He disappeared from the light, and the water immediately acted as if it had been alone. The oily film pushed the smile into position, the buoys stood out like teeth no dentist wants to pay for, and beneath us patience hummed again. Three short, two long, three short. The officer took a breath, as if he would start differently next time. "Entry," he said, groping for words that didn't resist. "Visual contact: Person in diving equipment. Action: unclear. Aggression: none. Procedure: maintain." The payboy wrote, and I saw his fingers linger a fraction longer on the breast pocket where the pen, which should have been in the felt-tip pen, had just been.

In the workshop, Conseil's glass clinked because the ship decided it wanted to be allowed to breathe again. The new brass pin lay next to the copper circle and the bands, as if they all had an appointment. The mechanic placed the tin bowl next to it, and the metal gave that polite laugh you eventually learn to love if you can't help it. Ned looked into the corridor as if someone were playing chess against time. The bosun stroked the small decorative knot the visitor had left for us and pretended he wouldn't retie it tomorrow until his fingers could manage it. The stoker put his hand on the pipe. "Constant," he said, offended because honesty is rarely thanked. The lookout raised his hand, half-way, and said, "Nothing," in that tone that had said most things for days.

I put my hand in my coat pocket. No pen this time. A ring. Dry, cold, double-struck. Next to it—I swear, even though I wouldn't be fit for this—was a second one, identical. I let them slide, held one on my tongue for a breath so he could taste no, and placed both in Conseil's open hand, without much fuss. He nodded, as if he'd been expecting it. He unscrewed the jar, dropped them. No sound. Just this feeling that the collection is growing, and with it, patience.

The bell retrieved a half-truth. Afterward: the duet of hull and buoy, flawless. The corridor remained, the two oil-tongued tongues finished writing their smiles, and the wind remained politely absent. On the edge of the bulwark, a wisp of steam lingered for a moment, as if someone from outside had laid a hand on it before leaving. The edge remained warm. "Stay," no one said. We stayed. Ned laid down the harpoon, not as a surrender, as a contract. At the next open light, I thought, you'll give what he asks: no secrecy. And I also thought: There's no need to pray if you keep to the beat. Someone kept counting below us. Three short, two long, three short. Polite, stubborn, like a neighbor who tells you through the wall every morning that he's there. We listened.

It didn't pull us, it persuaded us. First, there was this faint straightening in the wood, as if the planks had decided to be straighter than they were built. Then the bow moved an inch, maybe two, without asking the helmsman. No tug on the arm, no jerk in the knees—just a gentle roll over, like the hand of a surgeon checking whether the body still deserves its name. The stoker looked at his pressure gauges, offended that honesty had no meaning today. "Constant speed," he said, as if teaching a child the time. The engine hummed to its pious rhythm. And beneath it—the second pulse, polite, patient—answered with its petty arrogance: three short, two long, three short.

"Counter rudder," ordered the officer, and the helmsman gave two strokes to port. The Rose made her small, offended turn, found her way back into line, as obedient as a dog that's learned that whistles are punctuation marks. Our course remained the same, and yet, without consent, we were now in the middle of the corridor. The buoys outside were positioned so neatly that they laughed at us without smiling. Between four and five lay that neat, fake smile in the oily film, the two tongues that didn't need our alphabet.

"Log," said the boatswain. He fetched the board, the cork, the hourglass, as if you could force a number on a ghost. The cork went over the side, the line ran, the sand began to trickle down, and we counted knots that were never meant to be counted. The helmsman put his hand on the rudder to give his head the feeling of still being involved. "Four knots over ground," reported the boatswain dryly. "With zero wind." The stoker fell silent. The engine continued to do what it had been doing since day one: doing us the favor of being reliable. "We're being carried," Conseil noted, as if he had taken a temperature that no one would admit.

"Screw halfway backward," the officer decided, and the stoker obeyed, with the resentment of a man whose god is taking a break. Nothing roared, nothing smoked. The engine speed dropped, the tone changed, our pious rhythm rounded off—and yet the ship, politely, took another inch. Not against the water. With the water. The hourglass ran correctly, the cork pulled evenly, and I swore the knots on the line nodded at us as if they'd learned manners. "No way backward," muttered the stoker, stunned. "We're passengers in our own ship."

The mechanic crawled under the lamp carriage as if he had hidden a sin there. "There's something hanging there," he reported, and his tone said he hated that sentence. With his tweezers, he pulled out a new courtesy: a weave of the black, flat fiber, fine as a spider's web, tangled, artful, without purpose. No knot holding anything. An ornament, a lesson with two fingers. "Whoever that

is," said the boatswain, and his voice had that rough respect reserved only for enemies, "he ties knots you won't forget." The mechanic placed the weave in the tin bowl. The metal laughed that small, offended-pleasure laugh that had haunted us for days.

"Broom," ordered the bridge—not loudly, more like a man pleading to see his own error. The cloth lifted, the click caught my jaw, and the beam swept flat across the skin of the corridor. It became thread-thin where the window without a house slept, and I saw the seam again: modest, straight, a bead of sweat that doesn't boast. The light wire traveled on, and just as it passed over a second panel edge, a curve rose beneath the surface—not vanity, not a proud back, more a technical acquiescence. "Off," said the officer, and the light obeyed gratefully.

The bell breathed half a bell. Immediately afterwards, the hull rapped its polite alphabet, flanked by the brighter ping of the buoy on the trestle: three short, two long, three short. The paymaster looked to the officer, hoping for a word that would make everything right. "Anything unusual: none," the officer dictated with a tin tongue. The period at the end looked as if it were trying to apologize. "We're in the middle," the lookout reported, matter-of-fact as a thermometer. "And we'll stay there."

The drift was so clean it insulted us. No bumps, no lurches. Just this millimeter-by-millimeter adjustment in a gear that someone below us had deliberately drawn. I placed my hand on the bulwark; the fresh hole no longer felt like an offense, more like an electrical outlet. Warm, steady, as if a hand were lying there, waiting for an answer. Conseil applied his earlobe trick to the edge—ridiculous and proven. "Constant," he said. "Like a machine that's learned to breathe."

"Anchor," blurted the officer, the sentence of a man who still knows what things were invented for. The boatswain raised an eyebrow. "And what if he then lines us up neatly along the anchor boom?" The officer swallowed the answer, which was "order," and did the one thing he was infallible at: He went to the paper. "Hold course. No maneuvers. Double watch." Paper nodded, as paper does.

The men stood without moving, acting as if they were their own statues. Ned held the harpoon in a manner that said: not today, not secretly, only clean when. The lens polisher stood at the bulwark hole and watched his breath kiss the rim as condensation – the drop grew, held, then did the inappropriate thing: It drew upward, slowly, like gravity took a cigarette yesterday, and

disappeared. "Physics," the stoker murmured reflexively, but you could hear that he didn't believe himself.

"Log a second time," said the boatswain, who liked numbers when they were neat. The cork went overboard again, the hourglass was turned, and the line ran with that ridiculously polite speed the sea gave us. "Four and a quarter," he reported. "At half astern." The officer looked as if someone had shifted the lines of his uniform a millimeter. "We're being guided," said Conseil, and it was no consolation.

The film of oil deepened his smile, as if to show us that even mockery can teach discipline. Buoys Four and Five stood as if teeth were agreeing on the middle ground. And as the beam briefly passed over the skin once more—out of defiance, not necessity—we briefly saw what no one wanted to say out loud: a shadow of letters beneath the patina, unreadable, only the suggestion of straight lines belonging to a name. "Off," the officer pressed, and the mechanic obeyed, as if Licht were a thief today.

The mechanic pulled another thread from the sledge, this time not an ornament, more of a test. A small, perfect Turk's cap, so neat that the boatswain paled, as if someone had laid an intimate truth on the table. "Anyone who ties like that has hands that never freeze," he said. He untied the thread with the patience of a man who knows that concepts are made from mistakes and placed the thread with the others. The tin bowl laughed again, its laughter that eventually ceases to be argued about.

"The rum ban remains," Conseil said matter-of-factly, addressing those who wanted to drink to explanations. "We're sober. That makes it worse. Good thing." He wrote the time next to "drift" and "hole heat," drawing a line so fine it was more like a threat. The paymaster wrote "routine" in a handwriting that asked each letter individually whether it wanted to stay. I liked him for that.

Then the thing happened that you only believe when you've seen too much: The rudder was at zero, the engine was running halfway backward, and yet the ship's bow, politely and matter-of-factly, slid another inch into symmetry. No spray. No triumph. A planned centimeter, as if someone had laid a rail beneath us, unconcerned by water. The bell tolled out of politeness to the truth, and the code answered, promptly, kindly: 3-2-3. I felt it in my wrist, not my jaw. The body is a bad card.

"It's not pulling," said the stoker, finally finding the right words. "It's taking the pressure off where we're usually held. It's making us light until we're where he

wants us." The mechanic nodded, because ideas sometimes arise under the fingers, not in the head. "It's lifting us," he said. "Millimeter by millimeter. Across the tread." The officer heard this and did what he could: He preserved what little pride we had left by pretending this was his plan.

The buoy on the trestle vibrated once, briefly, brightly, as if it were counting. The dry spot on its paintwork stood stubbornly facing the corridor. The lens polisher touched it with his nail; the spot remained, as if it weren't a spot, but an opinion. "Broom," whispered the lookout, who had long since learned that requests are more effective than commands. The mechanic only ran the jet for a breath—enough to recognize the frosted window below us as present, and briefly I saw a row of tiny, even rivet heads—no boasting, just work—before the light went out again.

"No throw," the officer reminded, although no one had raised a shoulder. Ned nodded, not to him, to the sky. "In the open light," he said, not as a threat, but as protocol. "Straight hand. A clean answer." Someone, maybe me, maybe the wood, was breathing louder than necessary. You share the noise at times like these.

We waited, and while we waited, the depths did their paperwork for us. The bulwark hole remained warm, but no warmer. The copper core in the glass in the sick roll tilted gently, as if someone had asked it to comment on the situation, and then came back to rest—with the invisible marker pointing where the corridor was. Conseil's labels were given more numbers than one line could hold; he wrote in lowercase to fit reality.

The officer found his voice, the one that comes with factory-issued uniforms. "Maintain procedure," he said, as if it were a prayer addressed to machines. "Stay course, double watch, no light except brooms, no throwing without—" He broke off because the third "no" stuck to the roof of his mouth. "—without orders," he said, and no one objected, because contradiction is a maneuver, and maneuvers are forbidden today.

Then—because the world has a sense of humor when you're at sea—the hourglass on the log decided to be improper. The stream of sand flowed, correct, thin, even—and suddenly stopped, as if someone had drawn "Stop" in the center of the glass. Nothing for a heartbeat. Then three short bursts, two longer ones, three short ones, and the sand flowed normally again, as if it had apologized for its manners. The bosun held the plank as if it suddenly weighed more than wood. "I didn't see that," he said. "Me neither," I replied. Conseil

wrote it down anyway, small, shameless. We didn't look at each other, because glances are invitations.

The corridor stood still. The buoys held, the two oil tongues traced the bow neatly. The engine ran obediently backward, without effect. The other, the polite drone, continued to count, as if it were a matter of steering. Ned ran his thumb once along the notch on the harpoon shaft, not as a promise, but as a reminder. The mechanic carefully set down the tin bowl because metal had feelings today. The officer adjusted his jacket. The stoker put his hand on the pipe and said "constant," so quietly it sounded like an insult. The lookout raised his hand and said "Nothing," in the tone that had said the most for days.

We were now where the corridor wanted us. Not as prey. As an audience. And that was worse. I placed my hand on wood, felt our rhythm, the alien rhythm, the two of them side by side, so polite you wanted to cry. The bell took the whole glass, and the code came back on time. Three short, two long, three short. The day was only working light. The sea acted as if it had never known us. We stayed, because sometimes staying is the only thing that still sounds like a decision. And I thought, without wanting to think it: At the next open light, one of us will write. Not with ink. With steel. Cleanly.

The sky acted as if it wanted to give us a sample. No sunrise, just a crack in the gray, a bright wedge gliding across the water's surface like a knife over overly fresh bread. Worker's light, nothing more. Enough to insult lies and sharpen truth. The corridor out there was so perfectly aligned that it could have been reported for rudeness. The buoys stood like teeth a dentist straightens too straight on principle. The oily film traced his smile, two tongues rehearsing a word they aren't allowed to utter.

"Hold course," said the uniform worn by an officer today. Paper rustled because paper always thinks the world runs on ink. "Double watch. No light except brooms. No throw without—" He left it open, as if he knew the end of the sentence no longer belonged to him. Ned stood at the bow, harpoon at his shoulder, steady as a hand on a dog that has learned not to bite before the door opens. Conseil had arranged his glass shelf as if order survived on its own. The mechanic held his tin bowl so that the collection inside made no noise: fiber rings too neat to be wind; a strict waistband that doesn't come loose; two brass pins that looked as if they would like twins; the copper circle that invented patience.

Nothing moved, exactly in the way that says the most. Then came the first polite nudge, one of those that just shows you've still got your skin. No jerk. No

heroics. The ship was shoved out of its pose, an inch, right into the middle of the corridor. The stoker silently cursed his confidence, which had never looked so foolish. "Speed constant," he said, as if the world should apologize for not asking. "Reverse halfway holds," he added, and his voice sounded like a man who believes a lie because at least it's stable.

"Broom," the lookout asked with the new humility one learns when one has been right too often. The mechanic pulled the cloth a finger, and my jaw chimed: the click that says, these days we count with teeth. The thread of light went out flat, a polite fingertip over water. Over four. Over five. The skin grew thin where it had been for days: in the corridor, in the middle, as if someone were betting that this time we would really look. Beneath the beam lay the dull curve, the back without vanity. A seam so awkwardly modest that one could almost mistake it for shame. No shipyard bulge. Work. "Out," ordered the officer, too quickly, as if the darkness belonged to him.

The crack in the sky continued, stubbornly, and the day took on a hint of direction. Ned shrugged his shoulders so slightly that it was already too much. "Later," he whispered in the direction where the sun might pass if it felt like it today, and the air acted as if it had heard him. The boatswain tested the edge of the hole in the bulwark with the skin of his knuckles: warm, not warmer, the kind of warmth that tells you a hand on the other side is patient. He pulled his finger away, as if it were a secret that could be quickly closed up.

Then the small act of courtesy happened, one that offended us more than anything outright: The copper circle in the glass in Conseil's cupboard lifted itself a fraction from the floor, rotated slowly, once, exactly once, and came to rest with its invisible mark pointing toward the corridor. No one looked. Almost no one. Conseil jotted down a time, small, straight, like drawing a scar before it appears. "I didn't see it," he said. "Good," I replied, "me neither." He didn't smile. He wrote "maybe" after "rotation."

The bell called for order. Half bell. Its sound rolled across the deck, into the planks, into fingers one would rather have free. The hull answered, punctually and kindly: three short, two long, three short. The buoy on the gantry pinged the bright register in sync. The number-cruncher, who had grown yesterday, wrote "routine" and left it there, as if he knew that words sometimes only stick because they're too bad to go away. The officer gave him a look that should have meant "duty." It came as a "thank you," and he pretended it had never happened.

"Rudder amidships," said the helmsman, even though it was already there, out of the reflex that helps men stay calm. Outside, the oily film finished his smile. Two tongues, a bow, the pose of a mouth that dares to use letters. Not for long. Just enough to give a head what it burns.

The sky opened another inch. A strip of light made a path across the corridor, as wide as two strides. The mechanic squinted the lens, the light filament moved directly into the bright path, and then we saw something that shouldn't be found at sea when gods are to be left alone: beneath the patina, on the matte skin, unobtrusive, not large—a stamped train of straight lines. Not a word. Not a logo. Just enough for your head to know by heart what the beginning of a name looks like. An N, palpable even without a tongue. An A that doesn't apologize. A hint of U that returned to water too soon. "Off," the officer pressed, and the light obeyed, because it doesn't want to be blamed.

We said nothing. You don't argue about initials when the sea provides them with a lawyer. The stoker pulled his hand away from the pipe as if from a feverish forehead that has decided not to get worse. "Constant," he said, sounding as if it offended him. The mechanic pushed his tin bowl a bit, just so the metal could laugh. I realized I was making fists without meaning to. The code tapped in my wrist, smaller than in my jaw, more personal.

The lens polisher stood by the hole and watched as his breath grew like a droplet on the edge, lingered, and then did the inappropriate thing again: pull upward, linger, disappear, without a trace. "I never saw this in the shipyard," he whispered. "You'll learn it here," said the boatswain. It didn't sound like consolation.

"No throw," the uniform reminded him, and for a moment, that was even wise. Ned nodded, not him. He looked at the lighter stripe, as if his own name were misspelled there. "In full light," he said again, and for once the sun acted like it knew what to do. The crack in the gray slipped inch by inch, and if you'd been dealing with a church, you might have said "sign." We said "briefly."

The lookout half raised his hand. "Movement in the corridor," he reported, that new, clean voice we'd taught him over the past few days. No scurrying, no jumping. The buoys outside didn't move, and yet the line between Four and Five took on the ridiculous perfection of a ruler drawn from the other side. In the middle, for a split second, there was that rectangle of darkness again, as if someone were holding a sign underwater, practicing to see if it hadn't yet learned to read. The light wire was asleep. Our eyes weren't.

"Broom," the officer said without intentionally saying it. The mechanic obeyed. A kiss of light over smooth skin. The wire thinned. Beneath it, the scar, friendly as an extension of time. And there—a touch more brightness, exactly where the lines had been. For half a second, like the mirror of a punch: N—A— and then sea again. "Off," said the officer. It sounded like a request.

The sky made another act of decency: the bright wedge remained. Ned took a single breath, deeper than before. His fingers didn't dance. He raised the harpoon two fingers' width and put it down again, his way of telling a god that he was listening. The boatswain gripped the logboard as if one could balance on numbers. The cork went overboard, the hourglass turned, and then the glass did what glass can't do if you don't want to make up stories: It stopped in the middle of the river. Three fine blasts of sand, two longer, three shorter again. The boatswain held the board tighter, as if it were about to jump over the side. "I didn't see that," he said again. "No one," I said. Conseil wrote "sand" after "code." He didn't cross it out again.

From the workshop came the thin*ping*the buoy, bright, tidy, inside. Outside, the hull answered. It was still in my jaw; not in the palm of my hand. The officer raised the bell. He dropped it once, just one note, and that note returned cleanly, not from us, not just from us. Three short, two long, three short. A chorus of wood, metal, and patience.

"In full light," the bridge now said. Not as an order, but as a diagnosis. Someone has read the clouds as if they were a timetable. "In ten minutes." It was the first sentence that helped us all to our feet. Ned turned the shaft, once. The stoker slid his hand deeper under the pipes, because hands have to be where things happen, even if they have no say. The mechanic positioned the tin tray so that no tape would fall out if the deck were tilted. The bosun took the cut piece of linen from his pocket, examined the smooth edge, and put it back in as if building an altar of defiance. Conseil screwed his glass shut, so slowly that even the air waited politely. The payboy put his pen aside, not because it was empty, but because from here on, words must count.

The bright wedge crept forward, barely an inch per minute. No steam rose from the hole in the bulwark, only this contradiction of warmth, behaving like a hand under a shirt. The copper core in the glass remained in place, the invisible marker indicated the corridor; that was now the law. The buoys outside stood at attention, perhaps proudly, perhaps foolishly. The oily film laid on the smile so neatly that one wanted to say to him, "You want something, don't you?"

I put my hand in my coat pocket, out of reflex, and pulled it out again because my reflex had placed something inside: a fiber ring, double-wrapped, dry, cold. The one from before? No. A new one. It was so fresh in the air that it didn't smell of air. I turned it, and it clung to my skin for a second, without salt, without guilt. I gave it to Conseil. He was already holding the jar open. The ring fell, made no sound, and that was the loudest part.

"No throw without orders," the uniform said for the third time in two days, and this time it didn't sound like a law, more like an offer you could refuse if you had good reasons. Ned looked into the lighter stripe, placed his hand flat on the shaft, as if telling an animal it could run right away, but not hunt. "Clean," he said, very quietly. "No tricks."

The minute before the sun laid its stripe on our own wood, the final little outrage occurred, establishing order: On the inside of the glass with the copper core, where only condensation usually resides, two dry lines briefly stood side by side. No fogging. No creeping marks. Two thin, matte lines, side by side, as if they had forgotten that glass doesn't write. They looked like the memory of an N and an A, mirrored, cheeky, wrong. I blinked, and they were gone. Conseil wrote nothing. He looked at me as if I'd said "yes."

"Prepare," said the bridge. No pathos, no drumbeat. A workman's word. Ned raised the harpoon into the position that doesn't ask for permission. The mechanic stood at the lens, his fingers on the crank as if they were my teeth. The bosun stayed beside the bulwark hole as if to feel when another hand might need his. The stoker kept the engine speed as if someone would like that. The payboy put down a blank line, space for something that doesn't fit in ink. The tear in the gray became a stripe. The stripe became light. The corridor stood like a walkway someone had drawn for us. Below us, someone counted kindly. Three short, two long, three short.

I thought, without liking it, that if politeness cuts you, you cut back—in full light. And the day, cheeky enough to indulge me, acted as if it were about to prove that it meant it.

Captain Nemo staggers in

The light came down harshly, like a cash register check. No romance, just a working light over the corridor that lay outside between four and five, like a corridor that was too straight. The oily film tightened its crooked smile, two

tongues trying to write. On our deck, things stood there as if they would betray us: the tin bowl with the black fiber pieces, the log board with sand in its neck, the buoy on the trestle – dry-spotted, defiantly turned towards the corridor – and in the side of the ship, the perfectly round hole that had remained warm for hours, like a hand that wouldn't go away.

Then came the knocking, polite as always: three short, two long, three short. Not loud, just close. Wood answered in my stomach, the buoy pinged brightly against it, and shortly after, a shadow lay on the side of the boat that refused to remain a shadow. Two boots stuck to our steel, came loose, stuck again—magnet or magic, who can separate them?—and over the railing climbed a diver who looked as if he had eaten the depths and only spat out the metal. His suit was dull, worn night after night, a knife on his hip that knew his bad moods; on his helmet, a round glass, behind which sat eyes that looked as if they had decided to stay sober, no matter what the rest of his body drank.

He took a step that looked like a stumble, but ended up standing more precisely than our regulations. The glove tapped three, two, three against our bulwarks. Politeness with steel. The officer raised his hand, reflexively, the way one raises a uniform when the day decides to be unannounced. No one ran. We didn't have to. He was already there.

The diver paused for a breath, long enough to ensure no one did anything stupid, then reached for the neck seals. The glass lifted with a dull, contented sigh. A whiff crept out of the helmet that offended three rooms at once: old rum, fresh herbs, clean oil. Beneath it, a face that had been granted only as much sleep as arrogance doesn't need: stubble like wire, a mouth that smiled like a clean cut, and eyes that calculated our worth—not in money, that's fine.

He tilted his head, as if hearing a joke he himself had told, and typed the code on the side of the ship again, this time faster, more delicately: a reminder. Then he pointed into the corridor, his finger crisp, without drama. Stay. Don't run, don't run. Stay. It wasn't a request. It was the kind of instruction you gladly follow because the alternative costs money.

The boatswain took a half step forward, the kind of step you take to keep your fingers from tying knots in your face. The visitor looked at him, friendly as a dog that doesn't need a cage, and reached for the buoy on the trestle. He turned it a crack, just a crack, so slowly you were ashamed to look, and let it point exactly toward the corridor again, with the dry patch. A snap of the fingers to the world: That's how it's supposed to be.

He turned to the railing and pulled something from his side pocket that now stirs our hearts from sleep: a black, flat ribbon, dry as a sneeze. He draped the end over the edge, let his wrist do the work, and tied a small, absurd luxury for us on board—a decorative knot so neat that the bosun involuntarily held his breath. No point. Just skill. He let the thing hang as if he'd corrected our handwriting and looked around as if waiting for the grade.

No one clapped. Ned stood at the bow, his harpoon loose, his face the opposite of patience. The visitor saw the pole, grinned a bit more ugly, and, without looking, pulled a brass pin from nowhere. He rolled it between two fingers as if it were a coin, took a half-staggering step, "stumbled" past our payboy—and when the boy put his hand in his breast pocket, there lay a pin, smooth, flush, without a path. The boy turned pale, a color that didn't come from the wind. The Spirit of Order has bad manners, I thought. He fumbles in pockets.

"No..." The officer tried to think of a verb. The diver raised his hand as if he were about to take the sentence from him, tapped briefly on the edge of the warm hole, the metal responding with a sound that felt like a polite finger pointing through the wall. Inside, the edge grew noticeably warmer. He nodded as if contact had been made, turned his head toward the sun—which was in a hurry, but not for us—and wiggled his wrist: later. Then he pointed with two fingers toward the corridor, placed his palm vertically—stop—and held it there until even the officer understood that some orders are written outside.

He grabbed a loose mooring line as he passed, made a tight hitch—no nonsense, no pretense—tightened it, and loosened it again. It was quick, tired, effortless. The craftsmanship of a man who knows where wood gives and steel listens. The bosun blinked, as if someone had corrected his mother. "I hate this," he said very calmly, which is the height of compliment for him.

The visitor poured a swig from a flat bottle that smelled of a pharmacy behind his teeth and inhaled the remaining herbs from his helmet. Then he bent over the tin bowl containing our strange ribbons and knots, tapped the rim, and the metal laughed that small, offended laugh. He looked at me—not for long, long enough—and his gaze conveyed: You collect. Good. I'll deliver.

Finally, he tapped – three, two, three – on the bell, not on the clapper, on his belly, so that the sound stuck in the wood, and put the helmet back on. The clasp made*snap*The herbal scent was gone, only the rum remained, stubborn as a truck with a permanent place. He backed away to the railing, and his boots detached from the steel, stuck again, and came off, a staggering more practiced

than our best days. He didn't let himself fall. He disappeared, as if the water possessed him instead of gravity.

All that remained was the corridor, the buoys, the oily film—and on our railing, the small, indecent decorative knot that looked as if it had always been there. The warmth stood in the side of the ship, polite as an invitation. The buoy on the trestle turned a fraction until its dry patch pointed even more directly toward the corridor. No one touched the knot. Conseil fetched the glass, wrote down the time, place, and smell, and placed the new brass pin next to the old ones, as if collecting evidence until the lie is acknowledged.

Before anyone could find a wise word, the small, wrong detail that the day deserved happened: The decorative knot on the railing tightened by half a millimeter, without a hand, without wind, only with the sound of a job well done when it wants to be heard. We pretended we hadn't noticed. Some courtesies become sharper when they're praised. And in our guts, someone kept counting, friendly as always: three short, two long, three short.

We held our breath like bad liars, and the water did what it was capable of these days: it didn't forget us. First, the politeness of the teeth returned—three short, two long, three short—then the boots. Stick, unstick, stick. The diver was back, the same tank with the temper of a man who drank too much yesterday and is too precise today to apologize. He didn't swing over the railing, he negotiated it. A step that from a distance looked like a stumble and was close enough to be a workshop lesson.

He tapped the code on our bulwarks, let his hand rest briefly on the warm hole as if the metal were a pulse he'd memorized, and only then did he reach for the collar. The helmet opened like a safe. The air regained its flaw: rum, herbs, clean oil. The face beneath was alert in the wrong way; eyes that put a measuring tape on you while your mouth pretends to have time. He took one breath, looked at our corridor, which lay outside as correctly as a reproach, and grinned as if he himself had chalked it into the sea.

First, the buoy. He stepped to the trestle, took it by the shaft, turned it a fraction of an inch, and placed the dry spot back on the corridor with deadly precision. A polite slap on the wrist. Then our paymaster: He held the booklet up like a shield. The tank approached "stumbling," the glove not grazing a seam—and yet a second later, the boy stuffed his fingers into his breast pocket as if it had rung. He pulled out a brass pin, correct, smooth, without a biography. The officer began to construct a sentence that would include "preserving evidence" and only got as far as "Be—."

The visitor took a loose auxiliary line, pretending to be busy, and put a tight hit on it, quick, neat, painfully right. Learning when not asked: this was the kind of assault that makes men like the boatswain's jaws tight. "Halt," said the officer, because that's what he was trained to do. The tank released the hit, nodded to our boatswain as if he'd passed a test he never intended to take, and replaced the line so that it was less of a lie than before.

Ned stood beside his pole, breathing through his mouth, pretending his body knew the difference between patience and gritting his teeth. The tank saw the harpoon, tapped the shaft twice with his glove—not hard, just insultingly precise—and pulled his hand away as if he'd just passed judgment. "Nice pole," said his grin. "Wrong purpose," said his eyes. Ned didn't lift it a finger. He just placed it differently in his hand. It was a conversation with him.

"Contact without aggression," the officer finally dictated, as if one could forbid a storm from blazing. The paymaster wrote it neatly, the ink obeyed, because ink always obeys. The tank heard the word "aggression," tipped a swig from a shallow flask into the world, and blew the remaining herbs under his helmet. Then he tapped the code into the bell, not on the clapper, but on his belly. The wood swallowed the manners, passed them on to us. Three short, two long, three short. From the hull came the deep voice, from the buoy the bright echo. The network stood.

"Broom," whispered the lookout, as if finally praying to the right deity. The mechanic lifted the cloth a finger's breadth, the click set the nail back in my jaw, and the thread of light brushed flat against my skin. Out there, where our corridor has lived for nights, the beam grew thin, a polite wire, and below it the dull curve, a seam like shame, no boasting. The tank didn't look and saw everything. He waited until the light was out, then tapped two fingers in the air: later.

He knelt—as far as a tank can kneel—at our warm hole, as if listening at a well. He placed his hand on it, not pressing, just so that metal knew who was in charge. Warmth rose from within, not embers, not tricks, more like the assertion of a hand that never freezes. The boatswain carefully let his knuckles test the rim. "Is it getting hotter?" someone whispered, maybe me. "Constantly," the boatswain answered, and his mouth sounded as if he reluctantly was right.

Then he played caretaker. He took the ribbon we'd found yesterday from the lamp carriage, shook his head at our collecting, pulled—I don't know where from—a new, flatter piece of the same cheeky fiber, and laid out a little

teaching proposition for us, right in the dirt of our deck: a taut, flawless Turkish knot, one back and forth, tight, clean, without a show-off ribbon. The boatswain looked away because his face would have betrayed him. The mechanic held out the tin bowl; the knot went in like a club member. The metal laughed softly. The tank nodded, as if everything were back in order, but according to its own plumb line.

The officer tried again, using his tongue instead of his hands. "Who are you?" The tank raised his helmet a fraction higher, giving his mouth time not to answer, and pointed toward the corridor. He made a line with his glove, east to west, a thin line that said "o'clock." Then he placed his palm against our bulwarks, ran two fingers—one, two—tapped 3-2-3 again, and pointed at the sun, which toiled without interest. Time, not name. Conditions, not title.

Ned took a step forward, as far as one can take without saying anything. The tank saw him coming, not hostile, just uninterested. He made a small, weary gesture with his glove: Down. Not your hour. Ned stopped, and that was the hardest thing he did today. "In full light," he murmured, and for the first time, the sun shone as if it knew he was meant.

Meanwhile, Conseil held his entire little legal system in his hands: glass open, labels ready, smell noted. He looked at the tank's face, not for long, long enough to doubt the spirits of the evening. "Pulse normal," he said to no one, "Don't look." He shoved the paymaster's pen into his glass, as if he were accommodating a witness who would be needed later.

Finally, the tank leaned over the buoy cradle once more. He ran his glove over the edge, where the dry spot lives, and the spot did the impossible with the grace of a maneuver: He moved along for a breath—without wind, without a hand, only because he understood what was expected of him. Then the tank tapped the railing once, not loudly, a receipt, and replaced his helmet.*Snap.*The herbal scent transformed back into clean metal.

He backed toward the railing, his boots sticking, unsticking, sticking, his "staggering" acting as if it needed practice, and in the end, it was precise enough to warrant a ticket. Before he disappeared, he briefly ran two fingers along Ned's harpoon shaft. No cut, no force. A touch that felt like a deadline. Then he was gone, clean, without a splash, as if the water had swallowed him instead of taking him.

We were left with the corridor, the buoy, the warm hole, the bond in the shell, and a deck that smelled like order after a fight. The officer dictated, "Contact

without aggression. Clue the time. Maintain procedure." The payboy wrote it down, his handwriting neat, only the "H" in "Clue" was a little crooked, as if pointing at the boots. Ned put down the harpoon, not as peace, but as a contract. The boatswain checked the bond in the glass, cursed quietly, that respectful curse men used when they still carried wooden nails.

And because the day now owed a disrespect, it paid for it: The rope on our bell, which has been ringing for years when pulled, looped itself around in one breath, pulling itself taut until it made a clean, small half-beat—identical to the one the tank had just shown. No wind. No hand. Just the sound that does a good job when it has decided we're listening. The bell was silent. The hull was not. Three short, two long, three short.

The sea acted as if it had a sense of humor: no sooner had he disappeared than it called him back. Not grandly, not theatrically. Three short, two long, three short against the side of the boat, a bright ping from the buoy, and then two fingers rose from the water next to the warm hole, black in their gloves, like a polite footnote. No helmet in sight, just a work light on rubber. The fingers tapped 3-2-3, laid flat against the metal—and the hole responded with warmth that settled in fits and starts, as if someone were checking our pulse on their watch.

The officer made a run for an order that meant "to fasten" but failed at "fast." The helmsman acted as if rudder would help if the world ruled by hand signals. Ned stood beside his pole, letting his teeth talk silently. Conseil already had his glass open, his pen in his hand, his watch by the rim—it was clear he preferred collecting facts to victories.

The fingers pointed at the sun, then moved slowly westward, as if drawing a ruler across the sky. A quick thumb thrust downward: no throw that far. Then they swept into the middle of our corridor, which lay outside like a hallway that was too clean, and stopped. Stay. Then the knuckles came again: 3-2-3, this time in time with the ping of the buoy and the deep rapping of the hull; three voices, a poem the length of a bureaucracy. Negotiation, without anyone forgetting a word.

"Broom," said the lookout, not pleading, as one opens a door one doesn't own. The mechanic lifted the cloth for a breath; the click drove the nail into my jaw again. The thread of light swept out flat, becoming thin as wire above its usual spot, and beneath it lay the dull curve with the seam, ashamed to be seen. The fingers outside waited until the light was out, then drew a small figure eight in the air—patience—and tapped the bell, not the clapper, the belly. Our bell

swallowed the sound and let it dwell in the wood. I felt it in my wrist; my body became a membrane again.

"Conditions?" the officer asked the water, as if it were a formality. Answer: the two fingers held up first one, then two, then three, not as a number, more like a menu. Three men, they said that. Or three bars. Or three times yes. After that, they placed the glove on the bulwark and pushed it inward an inch. Our ship followed—not much, just enough to turn the burden into agreement. "Stop," the officer snarled, and the sea politely ignored it.

The boatswain knelt by the hole as if it belonged to him. "It's not getting hotter," he murmured, "it's just staying there on purpose." He pressed his knuckles, that old shipyard gesture that probes more truth than instruments. "Someone's holding their hand on it, thinking." The stoker looked at his gauges, insulted. "Constant speed," he said for the fifth time, which today was as useful as an umbrella under the keel.

The fingers disappeared, and in their place, a line emerged from the water, not ours. Black, flat, outrageously neat. It slid its end over the railing as if it were invited, and gave itself a tight little tug. Then the tug released itself like a circus trick. The boatswain looked like he needed to readjust his teeth. "He's bringing his tug," he said, "and lending it to us so we can see what ours looks like."

Ned raised the harpoon two fingers, nothing more. The sea responded with a glove that signaled "down"—not a command, a hint. Ned lowered the pole. It hurt, but his pain had manners. The glove brushed the shaft as it passed—no force, just measuring—and for a moment, it smelled again of that herbal stuff that claims to be medicine. "In full light," Ned murmured to the wood, and the wood pretended to remember that.

"Name!" cried the officer, as if words had ever convinced metal. From the corridor, at the very brightest spot, a flat, rectangular darkness rose for a fraction of a breath, like an underwater sign practicing not to write. The finger of light was asleep; nevertheless, my head saw the N, the A, the beginning that needed no more. The sea closed its mouth before we could point. Answer enough.

The rope on our bell did something else improper. It looped itself halfway around, tightened, and then stood there in a half-stretch—identical to the one the fingers had just shown. No wind. No hand. Just a sound that does a good job when it's found what it's paid for. "Hostile takeover of protocol," Conseil whispered, and for the first time that day, I liked his humor.

The mechanic pulled under the lamp carriage, because everything that contradicts us grows there these days, and—of course—uncovered a new piece of fiber, flatter, bolder, arranged in a minimalist decorative knot. He placed it in the tin bowl, which laughed softly. "He cleans us," said the boatswain, "until we shine, and then tells us we're clean."

The fingers surfaced one last time. They stopped three, tapped 3-2-3, pointed at me, at Ned, at Conseil—not directly, just barely enough for my gut to understand—and then shoved the flat of their hand toward the corridor, where the center lives. Guests, I thought. Hostages, my other half said. The officer was already raising the word "no" in the air; at the same moment, our ship made that polite half-inch toward the center that turns no into maybe.

Conseil closed his jar neatly, pulled a label, and wrote in small letters: "Condition set (3). Heat constant. Drift minimal. Clock:—" He raised his eyes as if looking to the sky for time. The sky was an accountant today and didn't write anything down. The stoker mumbled "constant" because he was left to it. The paymaster wrote "Contact without aggression" and put the period as if he had understood that periods are rarely the end.

Before the fingers disappeared completely, they tapped the edge of the hole once more. Three short, two long, three short. The buoy responded brightly, the hull deep; I felt it in my wrist and—for the first time—in my neck, as if someone were laying a thin cable there. Then they were gone, cleanly, without drama. The corridor lay there like a hallway inviting entry. The oily film smiled with indecent order.

"No throw," the officer finally said, and this time it didn't sound like cowardice, but like procrastination trying to make sense. Ned nodded, not him. "In full light," he said. "With a straight hand." The boatswain rested his knuckles on the warm edge, just for the record. "Constant," he repeated, snorting as if he had to apologize for the word.

In Conseil's cabinet, the copper core in the glass rotated half a degree, as if trying to maintain eye contact with the corridor, and then settled again. No one looked. We are capable of learning: some evidence lives longer if you don't feed it. Among us, someone continued counting, friendly as ever. Three short, two long, three short. And for the first time, I heard a word in that rhythm that I hadn't heard before:*later.*

The deck held its breath, and the sea did the opposite. First the friendly rhythm of the teeth—three short, two long, three short—then the boots. Stick, unstick,

stick. He was back, the armored suit. No entrance, just presence. He came over the railing as if it were part of his stairs, leaving his helmet down this time. Good thing: A head with metal can talk without wasting words.

He tapped our warm hole; the edge responded with that placid heat, as if someone were reaching out a hand over there, thinking about something else. Then he turned to Ned. Two steps. A grin that promised no fun. The gloves brushed once along the shaft—not roughly, just measuring—and lingered at the tip, as if trying to coax a story from the steel. Ned didn't lift the harpoon, he just adjusted it so it lay more honestly in his hand. That was enough.

"Down," said the helmet without a voice: a small tilt, a finger that knew no argument. Ned stayed. He remained the man who waits until the light is his. The tank nodded, as if it were a compliment, and followed on—no blow, no drama. A dull*desire*From the helmet against Ned's forehead, brief enough not to be considered violence, long enough to shift the senses into a new space. Before the body could say it, the glove had Ned's wrist, a lever saying "let go," a step over the top, weight where wood gives way. Ned didn't go down; he merely remembered that knees exist.

The boatswain made the kind of movement that eventually causes men to lose friends. The tank only saw him out of the corner of his eye and placed his other hand on Ned's shaft.*Click.*The tip was free. Not a theft, more like a loan with a reason. He held it up so that the worklight revealed exactly what should have hurt: a fresh, greenish abrasion along the bevel, fine parallel scratches like the edges of a panel. No fish in the world leaves a clean, tidy mark.

Conseil was already there, jar open, label ready, gaze steady. The Panzer didn't let go of the tip. He turned it once in the light, tapped the abrasion with his thumb, smelled it like someone who knows colors, and then wiped it off with two gloved fingers. A hint of solvent remained on the rubber, clean, persistent. He rubbed his fingers against our railing; the smell remained. The mechanic reflexively held out the tin bowl, as if metal could do something like justice here. The Panzer placed the tip back in Ned's open hand—no mockery, just punctuation.

"No throw," the officer finally managed to say, and for the first time, it didn't sound like fear, but like a value he could defend. Ned breathed through his teeth, took the stock back, and set it down so everyone could see: This isn't over, it's just not now.

The tank half-turned, took two steps to the lamp carriage, and—of course—pulled out a new piece of that cheeky, black fiber, as if the ship were now growing it on its own. It tied it in a knot that had more to do with geometry than with stability, let it hang, checked its fit, untied it again, and placed the ribbon in the mechanic's shell. The metal laughed softly, as if recognizing relatives.

"Contact without aggression," the officer dictated, and the payboy wrote it down, carefully, like a man who knows that diligence is the only thing that will save him today. The helmet turned toward him—just a crack—and the lenses looked at him, as if eyes weren't needed to count who deserves fear. The tank pulled out the bottle, a small sip, herbs over rum, the punctual blasphemy, and blew the residual aroma where our regulations reside.

Then he tried our bell. No clapper. Belly. Three short, two long, three short. The sound lingered in the wood, ran into the planks, and settled in his wrists. The buoy on the trestle pinged the bright register. The hull responded deeply. The network was up, and the tank pointed at it like someone who's set a switch and wants to know if the trains are running on time.

He stepped back to Ned and tapped the tip with his glove, now back where it belonged. A single, sober*tok*Then he drew the knife from his hip—not threateningly, just informing. The steel had that cultivated insolence that knives acquire when someone oils them more than they love them. He placed the blade on the thin auxiliary rope next to Ned's shaft and drew once. No sound, only the sudden lack of fiber. The cut surface as if polished. He placed the severed end in the boatswain's hand. He looked at it like a man whose handwriting has been corrected without question.

"In full light," said the gesture that followed: palm toward the sun, then slowly westward. Later. Clean. The helmet nodded to Ned, not patronizingly—businesslike. Ned nodded back, the nod of a man signing an appointment he has chosen.

The officer searched his pockets for courage and found paper. "Minutes: Demonstration. No damage. Procedure maintained." The word "demonstration" stood there like a guest uninvited, who nevertheless helps set up the chairs. Conseil wiped away the greenish grime with a rag, neat, small crescents, proper evidence. "Workshop," he said quietly. "Not the harbor."

The tank stepped to the warm hole, placed its hand flat against it, waited until everyone who would regret it looked, and then raised its fingers in the rhythm

we've now learned in our jaws. 3-2-3. The edge returned the warmth in the same small bursts. I swear, the hourglass on the logboard paused for three delicate breaths, then ran for two longer ones, then gave three more short ones before acting like it never knew what we meant. The boatswain gripped the board tighter, as if time could be tamed by pressure.

The Panzer lowered his helmet a touch lower, as if he were now completely a machine again. He tapped the decorative knot he'd left for us first—it tightened a touch, as if he wanted to behave when the boss was around. Then he backed over to the railing, boots: sticking, unsticking, sticking, the old staggering, which in the end is so precise you could mistake it for politeness. Before he disappeared over the edge, he raised two fingers, let them drop, and pointed into the corridor. Invitation. Or deadline.

He slid into the water as if on cue. The buoy pinged brightly one last time. The hull hummed deeply back. Ned stood there with the tip a bit more green than before, looking as if patience were suddenly a weapon he could wield. The bosun weighed the smooth, freshly cut fiber end in his hand as if it were a judgment. The mechanic set the tin bowl down; the metal made that little, rude sound, as if it had to laugh to avoid showing respect. Conseil screwed on his glass, wrote down time, place, smell, line.

We breathed again. The deck smelled of order with a hangover. The corridor outside was too straight, the oily film smiling too politely. In the cupboard, the copper core rotated—only half a degree—in its glass and came to rest again, with an invisible gaze toward the center. And the harpoon, without a hand, rotated on its base, a nothing—not much, just precisely enough that its tip now pointed in the same direction. No one was looking. Or everyone was.

It began with a line no one had ordered. It didn't come flung, it didn't shoot, it was simply there: a black, flat ribbon, dry as a reproach, fingering the railing as if testing whether wood and steel still knew letters. One end suddenly lay on our deck, neatly, with a simple, solid thump; the other disappeared into the water at the exact spot where the corridor showed its clean grin. No splash, no show. Just presence.

The tank—helmet down, boots sticking-unsticking-sticking—turned its staggering into a measurement. He stepped on the loose end, didn't pull,*directed*Two fingers, a half turn, and the punch that just a moment ago seemed as if it could hold, became something that*holds*The boatswain looked away, because his face would have betrayed him. "That's the way someone

who doesn't make excuses ties up," he murmured. The tank didn't nod. It moved on.

Outside, barely an arm's length below the skin, the water acted as if it suddenly had a lid. A dull, rectangular obscuration lay in the middle of the corridor, the same one that had been irritating us for days like a false sign—only longer, straighter, as if someone had finally decided to stop half-talking. The finger of light was asleep, and yet each of us saw the thing. The tank tapped two fingers in the air:*no*Broom. Then he stroked the fiber rope with his palm, and it responded with a slight, unheard-of twitch: three short, two long, three short. Our deck felt the greeting, the buoy on the trestle pinged brightly, the hull hummed back deeply. The net was up.

“Contact without—” the officer began, and the line politely interrupted him by*sensible*The tank pushed the loose end to our cleat, as if showing a child which way is forward, and tied a double—necessary, not pretty. He left it there, went to the second cleat, and in two movements untied the "safety knot" that for weeks had held our consciences rather than the ship, held the whole thing in his hand for two seconds, and let it fall back onto the deck as if he had taken the name off a fraud. "It won't hold," his helmet said voicelessly. The boatswain nodded, so small that only Sin saw it.

Ned stood with the harpoon in both hands as if it were a confessional. The tank gave her a look that*later*said, and turned to the bell. Not the clapper—belly. Three short, two long, three short. The sound crept into our fingers, settled behind our knuckles, turned men into membranes. Conseil wrote the time, the place, and drew a line that looked as if it wanted to become a scar before it deserved it.

"Broom?" asked the lookout, more guilty than necessary. The tank shook its head almost imperceptibly, and the mechanic suddenly had respect for a no that consists of a gesture. We left the light off. It was worse because it was more honest. A very flat strip of vapor rose from the water at the level of the line. It didn't bubble, it didn't smell—it*counted*I swore the fiber was going along in time: three, two, three, as if a rope could breathe and still behave.

"Where is he taking us?" the officer pressed, his voice searching his pockets for an answer that wasn't his. The tank placed its hand on our warm hole. The edge responded intermittently, the same little heart beneath metal. Then he pointed to the middle of the corridor, the dull surface—shaft, door, coffin, school, call it what you will—and made the gesture, the international language

for invitation: two fingers, palm open, pull. Three men, the fingers had said before. Three men now.*meant*.

"Not yet," Ned growled, so quietly it sounded like respect. "In the light." The tank turned his hand, pointed at the sun, which today worked like an accountant, and drew a tiny arc to the west. Later. Clean. He stepped back, reached for one of our auxiliary lines, which have been pretending to make sense since port days, and untied two of them blindly, without looking, as if his hand knew since yesterday where our lies live. Then he placed a small*Lesson*First a stern blow, then a neat Turkish ligament, then the reduction to the essentials—all in a river that looked as if the man had never learned anything but knots and war. The boatswain bit his lip. "He keeps order with his hands," he said. "We keep order with words."

Conseil was already standing there with the glass. The armored man tapped the rim with his glove, and the metal gave a quiet laugh. There was a slightly more subdued clinking sound in Conseil's cupboard than usual—or I imagined it. He placed the cut end of one of our ropes inside, the freshly polished fiber face sliding against the side of the glass like a sausage-fingered apology. "Workshop," Conseil said, without smelling. "Cleaner than a harbor, tougher than a church."

The line outside tightened ever so slightly—not enough to pull us, enough to give the feeling that we were being asked, not pulled. The helmsman held the rudder amidships, because men hold things when everything else is slipping. The engine hummed in its pious rhythm; the stoker murmured "constant," as if it were a prayer that didn't deserve an amen.

The tank took our gangway, which has been imitating a protocol for years, and – with an unheard-of trick – made us*fair*Entry where none of us wanted to go. A simple series of loops that holds even in our sleep, and a locking cable that only the person who set it can release. "Cheeky," said the mechanic, and it sounded like admiration in civilian clothes.

"Protocol: Foreign line on board. Knots corrected. No aggression," the officer dictated, moving erratically quickly so he could be first. The paymaster wrote, the pen making that shaky line you get when fear finally gets to do something. Ned turned the harpoon once, and the iron made a small, solemn noise on the railing. A promise without an adjective.

The tank raised his hand in farewell, rested two fingertips on the warm edge of the hole, and typed one last thing: 3-2-3. The buoy pinged brightly, the hull

responded deeply. He traced the fiber with his gloved hand, all the way to the deck edge, placed the strap over the edge, right between two rivets, as if his fingers had always lived there, and tightened his helmet a touch.*Snap.*Rum disappeared behind metal. Herbs lingered for a moment longer, then only oil.

He backed away, boots sticking, unsticking, sticking, his staggering the cleanest line I've ever seen, and slid over the side as if the water had sent him a bill he'd already paid. Left behind were the line, the knots, the invitation that didn't speak its name.

We were at a new pace and had to act as if it were ours. The boatswain ran his knuckle over the double end of the cleat. "Sit," he said, as if it hurt. The mechanic placed the cut end next to the other pieces of evidence, and the tin bowl laughed, that offended laugh of things that think they are in the right. Conseil wrote "Conducting fiber laid (own cleat)" and drew a line that would later be*too late*will call. The officer didn't lift the bell. He stared at it as if it were a door that no longer belonged to him.

And because the day had become accustomed to marking impossibilities, she came: small, clean, and cheeky. The fiber line, which had just been still, pulled a quarter turn.*after*. Nobody touched it. It was positioned so that the hit on the cleat was even more precise, the loose part was a little less slack, and a barely audible*ttk*into the wood, like a nod. We did what you do then: we looked away. The corridor outside smiled its too-orderly smile. Below us, someone counted kindly: three short, two long, three short. Ned breathed through his teeth as if it were a sail. "In full light," he said. "And then we won't talk in knots anymore."

The rope lay like a promise between us and what no one wanted to sign. No pulling, just that small, polite yielding in the wood when a deck understands it's an audience. The corridor outside remained exaggeratedly correct, the buoys stood like teeth, the oil film held its smile, two tongues behaving. Then the water in the middle did something water doesn't do: It didn't open—itfannedA shallow, matte crack, as if someone had carefully scratched the lake with a knife blade, precisely along a seam that only becomes visible in disobedience. No bubbles, no drama. Just a rectangle of pale green light that smelled of a hospital and of metal that must never rust.

The leash nodded. Not forward, not toward us –in timeThree short, two long, three short. Our buoy pinged the bright echo, the hull gave the deep fundamental tone. The officer raised his hand, as if one could arrest light. "No broom," said the mechanic before anyone asked. He was right: You don't light a candle when the sun voluntarily hides itself in a drawer.

Inside—call it a corridor, call it a throat—stood panels, flush, clean, each edge so modest that it was ashamed of its accuracy. No decoration, justWorkThe color: a hint of green, which at a shipyard is called "primer" and to my nose, "serious." Two rows of small, glass teeth ran along the ceiling—lights that responded to a nod.dimandraiseas if they had learned to pray. The nod came from the depths. Not loud, not official. A shadow raised its hand, and the lights answered in the polite alphabet: 3-2-3. Our bell cord didn't move a millimeter. Nevertheless, I felt the sound behind my knuckles, as if someone were attaching a measuring cable to me from within.

The tank entered the picture, nowinside. The same staggering, which in the end stands straighter than our sentences. Behind him two figures, identical in their tiredness, anonymous like screws that always fit. Not a word. Gloves that only point. One tapped a console—no bigger than the page in Conseil's notebook—and a brass pointer slid aroundaThe sea outside reacted bynothingdid. That was the most insulting thing.

"Do you see that?" whispered the lens polisher, and one could hear that his question was directed at physics, not at the gods. On an interior wall, just above the edge of the shaft, sat a small plate, matte, flat, with a row of disgusting rivets, so neat they had no scarring value. On it—not boastfully, almost bashfully—was what oneLetterscalled when you don't want to finish the word. A beginning was enough. There was nothing more than a beginning. The light retreated a touch before our heads could call it "reading," and gave us the smell instead: solvent, oil, a garden in the helmet.

The rope above our deck was taken between two fingers, invisible but noticeable. It tightenednot– she setsenseA fair run over the edge, as if there had always been a clear path there. The boatswain made that hand gesture with which menadmit, without kneeling. "Neatly laid," he said roughly. "No drama." The mechanic reflexively lifted the sheet metal tray, as if order had weight. The foreign fibers and knots clinked inside, the cut end of our own rope, the petty decorative knot on the railing. The sheet metal laughed again, that quiet, offended laugh of things ashamed of their superiority.

The stoker put his hand to the pipe. "Constant," he pressed, insulted by his own reliability. The machine kept its pious rhythm as if it were none of its business that the world beside it was writing in beautiful handwriting. "Report," the officer searched for support and found paper. "Internal structure sighted. No sound. No draft." He paused, as if realizing thatNois now someone else's name.

A drop fell. Not on the deck,inConseil's glass. A tiny crescent of pale green skin—abrasion?—attached itself to the inside of the spirit fluid as if it were its home. Conseil wrotewithoutSurprise: "Particles – primer? – Origin: draft shaft." Draft. Here. Where none blew. He screwed it shut, label, time, line. The man educated reality so that it would lie less later.

Inside, the tank raised two fingers and then the palm:stopOne of the silent figures touched the wall – and somewhere in the belly of the deep, the world turned down a notch. The lamps dimmed their brightness, not out of tiredness, but out ofmannersThe gap narrowed, not closed. An offer remains an offer until time and clock shake hands. Ned stood so still with the harpoon that his breathing made his shoulders feel strange. "In the light," said his hand, not his mouth. Someone inside nodded. I swear I saw it, even though I know heads behind glass don't have to nod.

The leash breathed. Three short, two longer, three short sighs – not a pull,courtesyA gentle back and forth that teaches a body how tofollows, withoutresultThe helmsman held the rudder amidships, his fingers too tight, because otherwise there is nothing left tofirmlycan be. The boatswain rested his ankles on the warm edge. "Constant," he muttered, and his mouth hated how right he was.

The officer tried to use rank: “Who is going over?” A legitimate question that doesn’t live anywhere. The answer was a gesture ofinsideThree fingers in the air, then the edge of the hand toward the light—and it stayed there, silent, until our gaze said "tomorrow" itself. He didn't like doing it. But he did it. Conseil looked into his glass, not out of escape, but out of work. "Tomorrow," he confirmed, as if one could record it and thus have already survived a while.

The shadow in the corridor took a weightless step and touched the edge of the shaft with his glove. Then the small, cheeky miracle that the day owed us happened: Ourbell, which no one pulled, filled from within with a sound so quiet that Holz wanted to keep it to himself. No sound to the outside. APressurein the wrist, aTicklein the throat, 3-2-3 written in flesh. The payboy ran his hand over his throat, as if bothered by a shirt he wasn't wearing. "I didn't hear it," he said. "Right," I replied. "It wasn't meant to be heard either."

The lights inside went up a touch, as if testing our nerves, then back downserviceThe gap remained open like a good trick: without proof, with effect. The tank raised its hand, this time in our direction. No wave. The kind of greeting that tells men:It's your turn.Not today. Not now. But the invitation has alreadysignatures.

In Conseil's closet, the copper core made that half-turn, which took too long to be a coincidence, and came to rest with its invisible mark pointing toward the corridor. No one was looking. We're learning. Some things become truer when they're not protected. The buoy on the trestle turned its dry spot over.nothing– precisely enough that it was back in the middle. The mechanic found under the lamp carriage – because everything grows there now – a new, flatter piece of the foreign fiber, to atinyA test knot was placed, more a signature than a help. The tin bowl absorbed it; the metal gave off its subtle laugh.

"Proceed," the officer said hoarsely. "Maintain." The word stood there, as if holding the railing to keep from falling. Ned set the harpoon down like a promise. The boatswain tapped the wood over the hole, twice, softly, as one taps on a door that isn't one's. Warmth returned from within in two bursts, then a third, smaller—asAnswerThe stoker said "constant" again, more quietly, as if he were shifting the word to someone else.

Before the gap folded its politeness, something flashed inside, right at the bottom of the panel joint, that is only there when you don’t want it to be: twostraightLines in green – not writing,IntentionI blinked, and they were water. The depths took back their light, the gap faded into a mirror. The rope lay there like a line under a contract. Below us, someone continued to count kindly: three short, two long, three short. We kept time, because resistance today would have been just noise. And I thought, without liking myself: This isn't an invitation. It's a house rule. Everything else will drown.

The day ended without telling us what shift we'd be working tomorrow. The edge of the light ran back from the corridor like a waitress who's lost her sight. The oily film held its polite smile, as if it knew we hated it and needed it. The fiber rope between us and the shaft lay like a signed contract no one had written. The warmth remained beneath the side of the ship, tactful like a hand resting on the doorknob and not forcing its way in. Three short, two long, three short—friendly, as if politeness weren't the weapon.

"Double watch," said the uniform, pretending fatigue was an opinion. The helmsman kept the rudder amidships, as a matter of principle. The stoker stroked his pipe, muttering "constant" like a curse that wouldn't work. The mechanic covered his tin bowl, as if one could cover up evidence so it wouldn't grow. Inside lay rings, frets, cut ends, greenish debris like flakes from an idea. The metal gave another low, offended laugh—not loud enough to comfort.

Ned sat at the bow next to his pole, not like a watchman, but more like someone explaining to an animal that it may run tomorrow. He held the

harpoon in front of him so it could breathe. One finger rested on the shaft like a promise without an organ. "In full light," he didn't say—his back said it. The boatswain walked off the cleat twice, ran his knuckle over the double strand of the stranger's line, nodded reluctantly, as if giving an enemy the address of his pride. Then he made a hand gesture that means "I'm learning," and that never comes easily to men.

Conseil let the labels dry. One read "Conductive fiber on board - misplaced (foreign)," another "Minimal drift - cause intentional." He unscrewed the glass jar with the copper core one last time, smelled the pale green in the spirit, and wrote "Werkhalle" in smaller print to leave room for things that don't yet know what they are. As he screwed it shut, the core rotated half a notch and came to rest with its invisible nose facing the corridor. No one said anything. Sometimes silence is better manners than applause.

The paymaster put down his notebook as if putting a child to bed who deserved bad dreams. "Contact without aggression" was written there, in a line that looked like a ladder we all climbed down. He looked at the bell. The rope showed the neat half-twist it had treated itself to today. He didn't touch it. He only pretended to know how knots rob you of sleep.

The corridor outside darkened, yet remained precise, as if its precision were self-illuminating. In its center stood that useless shadow again, the rectangle without letters, too short, to be honest, too long to disappear. No broom. No drama. Just the decency of a machine that makes us wait so it doesn't have to shout. There was no train coming from below, only meaning. This is worse.

"Three men," the officer reminded the air, as if the air had asked for permission: me, Ned, and Conseil. He said it without rank, as if listing cutlery. "Morning," he added, and the word fell on his boots. No one picked it up. The boatswain placed the smoothly cut fiber end in his hand, proof that edges can be made politely. The officer looked at it like a mirror that finally doesn't lie.

"Keep the men away from the rum," Conseil said, not preaching, just so no one can claim later that the truth had no witnesses. "If someone tips, they'll tip with a label." The stoker nodded, as if he had a drawer for that. "Constant," he said again, this time very quietly, as if he were talking to the pipe about what some gods at sea are called.

We spread out across the deck, each to his own alibi. The buoy on the trestle spun its dry spot around nothing—enough to greet the center again. Hanging from the lamp carriage was a fresh miniature bundle that no one had hung:

three-quarters the size of the one from before, the kind of impudence that makes men into students. The mechanic placed it in the bowl without a word; the metal laughed, as if practicing staying silent when it won.

Ned stood up. A bit. No hero, just a body. He raised the harpoon a finger's breadth, then put it down again. It made a sound only we heard. "Morning," said his shoulder blade. "Straight hand." The officer nodded at him, not as permission, but more as a request: do it so I can write it down. The helmsman pointed his chin toward the west. "Full light," the sky didn't say. But he pretended he could.

Then the little thing happened that sealed the days: Our bell sounded a note that no one else struck. No sound in the ear—a vibration in the throat, that polite tickle: three short, two long, three short. At the same moment, the fiber rope on the cleat tightened by half a millimeter, so fine that only Schuld saw it, and the deck gave a*ttk*back, which looked like approval. The paymaster wrote a time next to it without looking, as if someone had guided his hand. Perhaps someone had.

"Protocol," the officer began, then broke off and started again. "Shaft open – Status: waiting. Condition: three men. Deadline: full light." The word "deadline" stood there like a knife deciding to be a fork. The bosun stepped back from the cleat and scraped the salt out of his beard with two fingers. "He means it," he said, as if someone had doubted him. Conseil nodded, because nodding is the cheapest consolation humans have invented.

I went to the bulwark and placed my hand on the warm edge. Two thrusts, then a third, smaller one, the polite chapter mark in the metal. At that moment, a narrow remnant of brightness slid along the surface of the water, directly above the shaft mouth, no larger than a postcard. For a brief moment, I saw it again: the beginning, the straight lines, an N, an A, the arrogant hint of a U, before the sea rolled its tongue over it. Not a word. Enough.

"Lights out," said the bridge, and day nodded. The corridor remained—drawn, unlit. The engine hummed its pious beat. The other hummed deeper, unpretentious, only punctually. Three short, two long, three short. We didn't answer; we memorized it. Ned sat down next to the pole, so close that it absorbed body heat. Conseil compared his pulse and his watch, wrote nothing more because everything had been said. The stoker briefly laid his head against the pipe. "Constant," he whispered, reconciling himself to the word. The mechanic closed the tin shell, as if putting a mouth with teeth to sleep.

Before we lay down one after the other in our shaky nothingness, the world did us one last, cheeky favor. In my coat pocket lay a fiber ring I hadn't put there: double-wrapped, dry, cold—but this time with a tiny, clean brass pin shoved through my throat to keep it from opening. I looked at Conseil. He was already holding the glass open. We let the thing slide in. No sound. Just the certainty that someone was using our pockets as a mailbox.

"Morning," no one said. It was written everywhere. Above the hole, in the line, on the log, in the throat. The corridor outside was properly silent. The buoy didn't ping. The deck acted as if it were listening. I placed my hand back on the wood until the warmth of the other side knocked twice, then a third time. Then we waited—not for sleep. For light. Below us, someone continued to count kindly: three short, two long, three short. And for the first time in days, the rhythm didn't feel like mockery, but like a deadline we'd given ourselves.

A ship full of misery

The light hung dryly over the corridor, that worker's light that promises nothing and sees everything. The conducting fiber between our railing and the shaft hung taut, without pulling, as if someone had taught the rope manners. The oily film outside held its smile, two tongues behaving. The warm hole in our side tapped softly against our fingers: three short, two long, three short. Invitations sound polite, lest one call them intentional.

"Three men." That wasn't a decision; it was already in the air like the taste of metal. Ned put down the harpoon, taking only the shaft with him, as a walking stick for a path that doesn't want feet. Conseil tucked the labels into his breast pocket and slipped the small glass jar into his jacket, as if order were a kind of knife. I took nothing but hands. The officer watched us pass, tried to pour rank into our backs, and hit paper. "Back in full light," he said. That sounded like courage on credit.

The first step onto the fiber was less a step than an admission. No swaying, no trembling—the ribbon lay as if it weren't there. Below us, the water without an opinion; above us, only the sky, playing bookkeeper today. The fiber breathed in the wrist: three short, two long, three short. You walk differently when a rope counts. Ned went first, the shaft light, as if talking to a dog. Conseil followed, so straight that his fear had room to settle properly. I went last, so no one would see if I didn't trust the sky for a moment.

The shaft stood open like a formal apology: rectangular, dull green, a breath of solvent and clean oil. No steam. No cold. Just a dry air that briefly insulted the throat and then acted as if it had always known us. Inside, panels lay flush, edges shamefacedly clean, welds with just enough bulge to make you respect their hands, not their poses. Small glass teeth ran along the edge of the ceiling, rows of lights that responded to nods, learning beats before they understood words. One nodded somewhere deep down; the lamps dimmed and moved up in 3-2-3. A machine that prays makes less noise than we do.

Two men in work clothes waited, anonymous as screws. Faces hollow, hands with bandages cleaner than the skin beneath. The boots looked as if they had organized the entire world on foot, and no one had thanked them. One tapped the wall without looking, and the metal responded in a polite alphabet, as if knocking weren't language here, but climate. He showed us a mat covered with fiber fur, and we understood: Take off your shoes. Not for the carpet. For your nerves.

We entered, not like guests, but more like artisans, unwelcome. The aisles were narrow enough that our shoulders had to behave. The air smelled of a Sunday factory: solvents without arguments, oil without guilt, a hint of algae so clean that one suspects it has intentions. Small repairs everywhere, speaking louder than any explanation: a glove with a precisely stitched seam; a shirt with patches that sat like commas; a boot strap, re-punched so often that it had become grammar. Misery with a ruler. Order that writes across the margins.

The ground didn't give way beneath my soles. He was listening. I felt the vibration in my ankles: our honest, mechanical rhythm had to share space with the other, who hummed politely without raising his voice. Ned stopped against a wall; at waist height, someone had scratched the mark of a fish with a needle, childlike, hard. He stroked it with his thumb, not tenderly, just the way one touches evidence that no one will report. "Child labor?" I whispered. "Or longing," Conseil answered, and his mouth sounded like a clinician.

The men led us with gestures. Not a word, only what fingers can do when words are precious: Don't touch here. Don't lean there. At the level of a bulkhead, the man in front stopped, placed his palm flat against the metal, and the panel responded with a touch of warmth, as if someone over there were talking too loudly. Behind him, the world vibrated in its second pulse. The man nodded, took two steps, and we heard nothing; nevertheless, I felt the lamps go down a touch and then up again—3-2-3—like applause that wasn't for us.

Conseil pulled out his glass, unscrewed it a finger's width, and held it in the air like a sail for dust. It wasn't an act. He knows the kind of dust that believes stories. An impudent speck of pale green broke free from an edge somewhere and hung in the air, smaller than guilt. It wasn't traveling, it was just discovering that direction didn't matter to it. We kept going. The speck followed as if it had learned our name.

"No weapons," no one said. It was written everywhere. Ned held the shaft so that it looked like a walking stick, yet it remained steel. The men didn't glance at him; that was the trick. Those who are truly afraid don't look. At the end of the corridor stood a board, not large, with three brass hands and a line that belonged to no one. One of the men put his finger to the middle hand; it moved one mark. Outside, one floor away, the corridor did what had been bothering us for days: it remained precise, showing that it had obeyed.

We turned into a room that could have been a kitchen if hunger were a decoration. Metal basins, two pots whose contents smelled of duty, no spices, just tongue and warmth. Something that had once been fish, or merely the idea of it, hung from hooks; it was tidy, but that didn't help. On a table lay chopping boards, flat like arguments, placed 1-2-3, as if one had to count spoons to get one's fill. A hand that wasn't ours pushed three bowls closer to the edge. Not an offer. A rule. Ned didn't touch any of them; Conseil pretended to just count the scratches.

We marched on, because waiting here seems like a disturbance. Around a corner, a figure appeared who needed no introduction: the same bulky suit, helmet down, magnetic boots, a stagger that stands more precisely than our pride. He didn't raise his hand. He let the air do the work. Rum and herbs passed by like two disputing parties, and the lamps took note, not for choice. He tapped a plate, his glove said*further*, and we obeyed because the alternative wasted time.

The corridor took a turn, and there, on the wall, hung something that looked like a mirror without images: a matte plate, small, with too many rivets to be a coincidence. On it—not boastfully, almost embarrassedly—were two straight lines that weren't made of paint. Not writing. Intentional. I didn't stop. I've learned that you don't do such things the favor of giving them length.

When we stood near the shaft again, the man in front raised his hand, and the air answered. No melody, just that polite tickle in the throat, 3-2-3, as if the body had been declared a bell to keep us inside. The conducting fiber behind us, outside, lay a fraction differently, taut without tension. Ned turned the

shaft in his hand, once. Conseil screwed his glass shut, and at that very moment the world performed its small, indecent trick: From the edge of my boot, a tiny chip of pale green skin detached itself and fell not downwards, but upwards into Conseil's open glass, as if gravity were where labels live. He closed it, wrote Time, Place, and nodded, very small. Order takes what falls. We moved on.

The mess wasn't a room, it was a command. Metallic basins, two pots that smelled as if someone had mixed warm water with duty, spoons resting on the edge like flat nails: 1-2-3, so no one could cheat on the truth. The air had the hue of clean oil; behind it, a shimmer of seaweed, so proper that one mistrusts it. Three bowls were already ready, not generous, just precise. Next to them, the trio of cups—water with a hint of metal, as if the tap were connected to a machine that reluctantly shares.

The men of the Nautilus slid into their places like workpieces in a jig. Faces of thirst, eyes of work. Each spoon began with the same ceremony: hand on the table, knuckle on wood,*tok–tok–tok*,*tok—tok*,*tok–tok–tok*No drama—the agreement that even food must follow rhythm. The person serving wore bandages so neatly wrapped they were offensive. With a ladle that had more line than curve, he drew a thin, solemn broth in which scattered fat globules floated like indecisive answers. If one grew too large somewhere, he smoothed it off with the edge: order, even if it brings nothing.

We were given three bowls. Ned looked into them as if he were having to confess. Conseil tipped his glass a finger's width, held it up in the air like a net for dust. I smelled: a hint of garden, cold tea, metal, and that small, stubborn hospital that clings to every purified poverty. I took a spoon. It tasted of tongue, of seaweed without a sea, of a work that doesn't want to be finished and knows no stories. It was honest. That was the meanness.

He came without taking up space. Boots sticking-unsticking-sticking, helmet down, staggering that is more precise than pride. The Panzer. Rum on the edges, herbs like an excuse. He didn't raise his hand. He was Hand. He walked past the pots, tapped the rim once with his glove—the ladle faltered, as if it had learned to listen to signals. A man in the line coughed, dryly. The Panzer didn't look, and that was precisely why the cougher put down his spoon, ran two fingers over a bandage, and pretended it was all natural. Conseil pulled a small, gray packet of gauze from his pocket, laid it on its edge. The cougher didn't look at him. He took the gauze. It was the kind of exchange that only occurs in an order that has too little to be polite.

"Stand up," no one said, and yet the line rose with a sound that sounded like discipline. The tank pulled out a flat bottle, taking the smell out of the mess and giving it tone: a quick drag, herbs over rum, then a puff against the helmet, as if the fumes needed to know who was writing. He tapped his glove against a wall panel, and the lamps dimmed a puff, rose again, 3-2-3—something like grace in engineering. Ned held the spoon in the air, let it sink again. We learned quickly.

"Drink," his mouth didn't say; his helmet pointed at our cups. I lifted. Metal on lip, water with the taste of serious cane. It went down because things must go down. The tank looked at the spoons, not at us, and his gaze was the kind of judgment that makes men make one less quirk. Then he turned to the bread—four, five pieces, hard like resolutions held in one's head for too long—took one between two fingers and broke it precisely into thirds. He placed the pieces next to each other as if drawing coordinates in Mangel. None for us. That was fairer than it looked.

Ned ran his thumbnail over a splinter in the wood of the bench and didn't pull it out. His brow said argument, his shoulders said pause. Conseil fished a greenish rim out of the broth with the tip of his spoon and tipped it into his glass. The scrap didn't float; it made up its mind. It settled against the inside wall like a proper debt. Conseil later wrote the word "primer"; I saw it on his face, even before the label stuck.

The tank passed us, brushed against my sleeve, didn't touch me, and yet something cracked in my pocket, as if paper had winked at me. I reached in: a brass pen, smaller than the usual ones, with a notched mark on the cap—signature. I left it where it lay. There are times when you keep evidence longer if you forget it. The tank was already behind us. He tapped the rim of the cup, not mine. A single, cheeky*tik*, and the water skin made three rings—short, long, short—as if one could learn to drink with geometry.

"Protocol," the officer behind me said mechanically, without a piece of paper in his hand. His voice searched for support, found nothing, and let the words hang like guests who haven't paid. The Panzer looked at him. No mockery. Just the interest of a man who wants to know if the other has understood that there's no room for tones here. He raised the bottle, not as a toast, but as a measure. Then he put it away. The line immediately exhaled.

A girl would have been missing here to find the whole thing bearable. Instead, two rags hung on the wall, too neatly patched to be home. On one were numbers engraved in the fiber: short, slow strokes that looked as if they had counted heat. Next to it was a small tablet with three brass pointers and the

line no one was allowed to read. The man with the bandage gave it a half-blow—a number cough—and somewhere in the belly of the ship, the machine gave a nuance so subtle that only Schuld heard it. 3–2–3—once, quietly.

I ate. The broth had no patience with tongues that want stories. Ned didn't eat, he saw. His gaze lingered on the shell's blade—on the polish, on the edge, on the self-confidence of steel. He held his spoon like a man just breaking the habit of hitting on sight. Conseil put down his glass, pulled out a watch, noted times, as if one could give a hungry day a structure that would satisfy.

The Panzer approached a man at the end of the bench, one with a stitch across his hand so neat it was almost pretty. He turned the hand over, looked at the work, and nodded like a strict father who doesn't praise the child for homework because the child has to go back to school tomorrow. Then he tapped the bandage twice:*You go on. Not broken today.*The man didn't smile. He put the spoon to his mouth and hit it.

A small detail that no one noticed: The spoons in the row weren't placed randomly. Each one had a tiny notch on the end of the handle, sometimes on the right, sometimes on the left, sometimes in the middle. The Panzer went over it with a look that sorted things out without bending down. Three notches in a row made the same rhythm that's been counting our bones for days. I didn't hear it. I felt it in my wrist. Order down to the utensils. Misery that can be laid on the tongue because it's served cleanly.

Ned put down his bowl. Precisely. Not a drop spilled. That was his way of not bowing. The armored man raised his glove, so barely that only people with sin saw it, and pointed toward the aisle. Onward. Eating isn't a break here, just a joint. We stood. The bench made no sound, as if it were accustomed to not complaining.

Before we left, something inappropriate happened in miniature: Our three bowls, which had just been a finger apart, moved a touch closer together—*ttk–ttk–ttk*—and stood in a line that didn't need to be adjusted. No wind. No hand. Only the decency of an order that still wants to make its mark even with empty bowls. Ned didn't look. Conseil acted as if he had invented it. I picked up my cup, and three rings converged on the surface of the water, short, long, short. It tasted of metal and morning. We left.

The engine room wasn't a hall, it was a confessional. Heat without ostentation, air dry as paper. No rust, anywhere; instead, welds that were ashamed of how neat they were. The floor vibrated in two languages: our honest pounding, and

beneath it, that polite hum that for days has been pretending it's just the weather. Cables ran in bundles, tamed with the black fiber material, each loop so precise that you were reluctant to look at it. On a rack, tools hung like prayers: wrenches, pliers, all sorted by size, the handles smooth from necessity, not vanity.

Two men worked on a panel. No talking, just breath pretending to taste something. The gloves had the kind of seam that doesn't lie: neat, tight, lessons learned in pain. One pulled out a module with a quick tug, a sheet of metal that sounded like a precise disappointment. Beneath it, copper teeth that looked like little confessions. He wiped along it once, not because there was dirt—because order takes a breath. The other pressed the heel of his hand against the wall and waited for a response. Warmth returned in spurts, a quiet 3-2-3, as if the ship were registering its pulse without being sick.

Ned took in the room like a dog takes in the wind. Valves, locking cables, a series of small, round lids with tiny locking pins—everything labeled with that austere, insulting neatness. He stopped in front of a valve, barely larger than the palm of a hand, with a notch that smelled of haste. "Bypass," his shoulder whispered. He touched nothing. He only measured. Then he silently counted the spacing of the retaining rings, as if counting the teeth of an invisible clock. Conseil did what he always does: he made the world small enough for the glass. A crumb of pale green skin detached itself from a corner somewhere, took the wrong direction, and clung to the inside wall of his spirit, as if it had always wanted to live there.

The tank stood at the edge, casting shadows in order. Not a word, just that crooked wobble that ends up standing straighter than we are. He tapped the console once with his glove—a sound, not a command—and a brass pointer made a shameless millimeter jump. Outside, nothing was happening, which was precisely why I believed him. On a side table stood three small filter jugs, empty, rinsed, with fiber labels: one, two, three. Conseil crossed over "two," smelled the steel and the garden, wrote "Water draft, minimal, intentional," and briefly stuck his tongue between his teeth, as if forbidding the day from lying to him.

We passed a pump whose casing was so smooth that light slipped on it. At the base lay a bowl of fiber scraps—not waste, samples. A Turk's cap, a tight knot, a decorative knot that showed no mercy. I didn't pick one up. The tin bowl in my head was already laughing enough. On the wall above was a shelf with lines, thin, shamefaced, as if someone had been counting hours that never pass. In

between, an incised curve, flat, clean, that looked like a machine trying to draw a wave and learning honesty in the process.

"Do you hear that?" no one asked. It was heard nonetheless: metal being polite. A valve body gave three small kisses into the pipe, paused, gave two longer ones, then three short ones again—not a mistake, a habit. Ned shifted his stance so his feet wouldn't respond. The tank watched him, raised two fingers, lowered them, and the heat receded a fraction, as if to make room for thought. One of the Nautilus men loosened a locking pin, replaced it, without looking, without pleasure. His hands didn't tremble. His eyes were further away than work.

We passed the cells—glasses behind bars, silent, pale, the kind of energy that consumes more discipline than coal. Between two rows stood a stool, polished by fatigue. On it was a cup, empty, clean, with a tiny notch on the rim, to the right. Next to it, a second, notch to the left. A third, in the middle. I didn't need an officer to understand the rhythm. 3-2-3 is easier when cups count. Conseil put his hand to the bars, pulled them back. "Constant," he murmured, and his mouth sounded as if he finally stopped hating the word.

Ned pointed with his chin at a shaft in the corner, lower than the rest, with a cover that someone had to love: four screws, fresh, not all the way tight, just honest. Above it, the fiber locking cable, which I now recognize in my sleep. "That's where it goes out when there's a fire," his neck said softly. The tank heard the sentence that no one had said and tapped its knife twice, not threateningly—legally.*If so, then by o'clock.*I understood him without having to like him.

A Nautilus man coughed, dryly. Conseil was quicker than shame. Gauze. Iodine. A glance. The tank let it happen, the lights dimmed for a fraction of a second, then rose again, 3-2-3, as if authenticating a signature. Ned bent over a pressure gauge block; his index finger ran down the scale without offending it. The needle was where "enough" lives. It didn't twitch. Until the world, which likes us when it torments us, did its little trick: The needle tapped the stop pin.*tik-tik-tik—tik-tik-tik—tik-tik-tik.*No rash. Just the touch in the code. Afterward, she stood still again, as if she'd never known how to speak.

“Protocol,” I said to myself, because no one else here had the floor.*Machines pray. People save. Order maintains because misery adheres better to rules than joy.*The tank turned, its wobble as precise as a plan, and pointed toward the room's exit. Onward. The heat lingered behind us like a reminder that no longer needs to explain its purpose. Ned looked one last time at the notched

slider. I saw him memorize the distance. Conseil screwed his glass shut. A pale green crumb, which had just been perched on the edge of the console, came loose, rose—not fell—and stuck to its label as if it had an address there. We left, and the floor vibrated in two ways: honest and polite.

The bunks were honest. No curtains, no pension. Metal frames so smooth they let the light slip; blankets made of patches that deserved a better biography. At eye level, carved into the paint: fish with overly large eyes, a boat like a line, three waves stupid enough to be straight. Someone had rubbed the grooves with wax to stop them screaming. It didn't help.

The air smelled of clean sleep, which isn't: solvents, dry sweat, a trace of algae that politely insults the throat. Beneath the bunks stood boxes, each labeled with a piece of fiber tape, the writing as sparse as hunger. A man lay on his back, his forearm bandaged, the bandages so neat they seemed like a lie. He coughed once—dry, measured, the kind of cough that knows it's disturbing. A hand rose from the next bed and tapped the bunk:*tok-tok-tok, tok—tok, tok-tok-tok*. Not a consolation, a mannerism.

Conseil pulled his small hospital kit out of his pocket. Gauze, iodine, thread. No preaching, just hands. He changed a bandage that would have held up long ago, only not well. He smelled the wound, not greedily, professionally, nodded to his own nose, and mentally wrote the nod on a label that didn't yet exist. A crumb of pale green skin, barely larger than a word, detached itself from the bed frame and pretended to fall. It paused in the air as if there were an edge there, and then settled into Conseil's open glass as if it had an address.

Ned remained in the corridor, the shaft in his hand, the walking stick that wasn't one. The men didn't look at him—out of consideration or tactics, it was hard to say. He saw the seam on a blanket, a row of small, neat stitches, as even as clock teeth. He touched them with his knuckle. They held. "He who sews lives," his face said. His mouth said nothing.

A boy, too old to be young, too young for anything, lay on his side, the blanket up to his chin, eyes open. On the cupboard next to him: three cups, notches right, left, and center. Order against the cold. He turned the middle one a fraction—the notch now faced forward. I could have sworn his fingers were tapping in the cloth, invisible. 3-2-3. Maybe it was his pulse.

The roll of sickness consisted of a table, a lamp, five glasses on a shelf, and a man who looked as if he had offered pain the familiar "du" (first name). He wore no cap. His hair was too short to disturb the order. Conseil placed his own

glass next to it, unscrewed it, and held it under the lamp. The green splinter didn't dance; it settled on the inside, so obediently that it hurt. Next to it, on the Nautilus shelf, floated particles you only recognize if you already know them: fiber dust, metal dust, fine varnish that has never seen water. Each glass had a fiber label, folded three times, labeled three times: day, place, time.*Beat*, not clock.

The man nodded to Conseil. A handshake without skin: gauze against a gaze. Conseil handed over iodine, receiving no thanks, only a calm breath that signaled "continue." He opened a seam on one palm, made two stitches, placed three new ones, small and neat, pulling the thread with that brazen certainty that only comes with practice. The man bent his fingers, and a depth somewhere in his throat answered: a soft, polite tickle—three short, two long, three short. Our bell didn't have to ring; the body does it itself.

At the foot of a bunk lay a knife, wrapped in cloth, varnish on the back, the blade invisible. Next to it was a brass pin, thinner than ours, with a notch mark that looked like someone remembering their name. I made no gesture. Evidence lasts longer if you don't adopt it. Above the bed hung a board with three brass pointers. The middle one stood on a mark someone had scratched into it with fiber. A man came, put his finger on the edge, pressed—the pointer slipped a mark. No alarm, just a world changing tone: the lamp briefly swallowed a piece of light, released it again, 3-2-3, like a breath waiting to be counted.

"Water?" Conseil asked, his eyes wide open. The man pointed to a shallow jug; the taste was reed and duty. Ned didn't drink. He watched the door—actually, it wasn't a door leaf, more like a self-respecting bulkhead. Someone had wedged a small fiber object onto the edge: a tiny Turk's cap, a miniature test. Ned didn't press it. The cap tightened a fraction, as if it had registered his presence anyway.

I wrote my own report with my eyes: precise bunk spacing, recurring ceiling measurements, patches in groups of three, cups with notches, glasses in ledges. Order as heating. Misery that only works when it's clean. A man who had just been asleep sat up, pulled the bandage from around his neck a bit, and adjusted it, not out of vanity, but out of pride. He placed his hand on his chest. Two blows, then one, smaller. 3-2-3. He didn't smile. He was breathing.

The tank came later, a stagger that was more line than step. Helmet down, boots quiet. He didn't see us, he saw the rows. He stopped in front of a bed, in whose varnish lived the fish with the overly large eyes, and stroked it with his

glove, as if to lift the wood's chin. The fish shone for a breath, only to become dull again. The man in the bed pulled the covers higher, not out of fear. Ritual.

The tank tapped the bar with the five glasses—*tik*The lamp dimmed, and he pulled it up again. He gave Conseil a flat, brief, non-hostile look:*You're doing it right. Listen to my watch.*Conseil nodded, as if consent were an operation. He labeled his glass, smaller than usual to fit more truth. The label now read: "Dust (green) – Sick roll – falls upwards."

As I was leaving, I saw it. No wonder, just a miniature insolence: At the boy's bunk, the three cups without hands were moving closer together, a breath away.*ttk—ttk—ttk.*Notches in line. The boy didn't blink. He already knew. Ned gripped the shaft a little tighter in his hand, as if telling an animal it could run later. Conseil turned the lamp a degree cooler. The shell nodded to the air, and somewhere in the metal, the warmth responded in three bursts, the third smaller, as always. We moved on. Behind us, a ceiling seam tightened itself a millimeter. No one touched it. Sometimes order laces itself.

The punishment stage was a square without shadows. The floor was covered with lines, thin as cuts; on the wall, a plate with three brass sliders: AIR, LIGHT, WORK—no words on it, just the idea. Above his head, the small glass teeth, ready to obey. No hook, no rope. Just space that sets you up straight while remaining polite.

A man stood in the middle. Thin, clean, his hands forward, not out of humility—out of technique. Between his thumb and index finger ran a piece of this black, flat band. He added beat after beat, slowly, correctly, and the band became a small, perfect bunch. No jewelry. APleasein material. He placed the fret on the line on the floor. Waited. Breathed the beat: three short, two long, three short. No coughing. No drama.

The tank stepped into the frame, helmet down, tumbling in a direction that was ultimately straighter than ours. He tapped the brass plate once. The lights did their obedience: down, up, 3-2-3. He pointed to the band on the ground, then to the man. No question. A test. The man raised his hands, showing the edges—no burrs, no vanity—and stood still, as if he knew that standing was the word here.

The officer next to me did what officers do when the rooms do the talking. He formed a "right" in the air and looked for an audience. The tank turned its head, a hint, enough for the lamp to understand. A finger on the left slider.One click.The air took a breath away from our lungs. Not much. Enough that words

suddenly cost money. The officer remained silent because his sentence had no coins.

"This is how punishment works here," said the gesture. No stick. No scream.Throttle.Light a notch lower, air a notch narrower, work a notch higher. You learn how long you can tolerate politeness before you kneel. The man didn't kneel. He pointed at the waistband. The tank took its time, the kind of mercy that hurts, and pushed the slideraKorn back. Breath became cheap again. The lamp nodded.

A second Nautilus man detached himself from the edge. He carried the calm of people who never finish. He picked up the bundle, bent it slightly—testing—and placed it in a shallow bowl on the wall. Bundles lay inside like receipts. Next to it was a second bowl, empty except foraA failed hit that looked like an excuse. The man tapped the empty bowl, then himself, then the floor.Catch up on work.The covenant was good today; the guilt came from yesterday.

The boatswain understood first. "Please instead of report," he mumbled, as if he'd choked. "Those who tie knots neatly can speak. Those who mess up get shifts." The tank heard the meaning, not the words, and nodded curtly. He pointed at the officer and the empty bowl. No mockery. A sentence about systems: Paper doesn't help here. The officer put his tongue aside where it wouldn't get in the way.

The man in the middle started moving again. Not walking. Doing. He took a new piece of fiber, made three tight, equal strokes, tightened, twisted, and finished. It looked as if the hand had decidedOrderto be. He placed the fret on the line, exactly where the other one had been. The Panzer looked at it like an examiner who hates grades because they say too little. He tapped the brass plate: light up by a touch, air still, work remains. Mercy in millimeters.

Conseil held his glass half-open, unobtrusively. A pale green particle detached itself from the edge of the metal bracket above the plate, decided against gravity, and settled in his spirit, as if that were the home of all evidence. He labeled it in small letters: "Please-Bund – Testing Station – Particle (green) – Air +1, Light +1." He wroteBeat, not clock.

The silent Nautilus man, who had just played the examiner, approached us. Not a sound. He took a very short piece of fiber from his pocket, barely two fingers wide, and knotted it—for our eyes only—into a miniature, so tight that it held pride. He held it out to the officer. He didn't understand anything. The boatswain raised his hand and stopped the misunderstanding, as if one had to

take a nail away from a child. "That's not a gift," said his beard. "That'sPleaseto learn to read." He placed the miniature in the mechanic's metal. The metal laughed quietly, as it always does when it's right.

The tank tapped its knife twice, then the brass plate. The right slider—WORK, if you wanted to think of the word—slid up a grain. All around the ship,nothingLoud. But I felt men we didn't see getting a jolt into the day: quickening their pace, gripping tightly, spooning later. That was the sermon:House ruleswithout a voice. Then the glove touched the center of the plate. The lights breathed 3-2-3. "Everything else is drowning," the room said for him.

Ned stood with the shaft like a walking stick that knows secrets. He raised it a finger, no threat, justAnswerThe tank saw the movement, only halfway, and gave him a reprieve with his helmet: two fingers, then the edge of his hand to the west. Later. Clean. Ned nodded. You can make deals with nods even when you don't have any ink.

A Nautilus boy—too old and too young at the same time—stepped to the line, planted his heels precisely, and held his hands still. He had the mouth of someone who had been living on "later" for weeks. The shell gave him fiber, in short, and the boy set a bond thatalmostwas clean. He held it up, not looking for help. The tank pushed airnoneLine, light half, work zero. The boy breathed. Then he untied the waistband and made himagainThis time he was sitting. The lamp gave back a breath it had just taken from us. Pedagogy that doesn't teach patience.

The officer tried one last time to establish rank. "And who decides—" He got no further because the tank answered his question with order. He stuck two fingers into the bell rope that hung on the wall like a dead strand, let it go—and it tied itself.Half hitch. Not because of hand. BecauseRuleThe leash vibrated in his neck: 3-2-3. No music. A contract that was simply signed, without us.

"Look," the boatswain simply said to Ned. Ned didn't look. He memorized it. Conseil closed his glass as if putting a full stop to a bill that had been paid. The tin bowl received the miniature, and the metal laughed that quiet, guilty laugh when things land on the right side.

We turned to leave, because you don't stay here if you don't want to work. The man in the middle stepped off the line, and the room performed its little, indecent trick: The three brass sliders on the plate suddenly stoodexactlyAt the same height—without a hand, without a click, just a ttk from the sheet metal.

Air, light, work: flush, straight, one line. The tank didn't look. It already knew. We now knew enough, too. Behind us, the plea in the shell tightened by half a millimeter—as if consent had weight.

The storeroom was matter-of-factness on shelves. Boxes with fiber labels, folded three times, labeled three times: Number – Place – Beat. Tin cans without promises, only notched lids, as if they'd been taught to keep quiet. A scale stood in the middle, its mouth set to thin. The pointer rested where "enough" must live if "more" were abolished. Someone had scratched a mark on the edge with fiber: three short notches, two longer, three shorter. I didn't need an officer to understand the liturgy.

Rows of hooks ran along the end wall. Strips of meat hung from them, too clean for romance, too scant for sin—a fish, or what's left of you when you've been dealt with. The edges of the cuts were so smooth that light slid off them. A knife lay on a rag, its back covered with protective film, its edge guiltless. Ned stood before it, not hostile, just honest. He watched the blade and didn't pull his thumb; he'd given up touching it in the last few days.

The air was a compromise of salt, oil, and metal, beneath which lies that clinical green that inhabits everything here. Cables ran above the crates, tamed with the black, flat fiber material, in loops so precisely positioned that you automatically straightened your back. Someone coughed at the end of the corridor, once. Conseil was quicker than shame. A piece of gauze, a look, not a word. The man took the gauze as if he knew that thanks are like spice: a luxury at sea.

The "garden" came in the next room and had a sense of humor: no ferns, no longing, just troughs of algae, thin veils in narrow channels, doing their work in the cold light. Small bubbles fluttering at the edges, valves that don't sing, only obey. The colors ranged from bottleneck green to bill blue, always cleaner than the heart. From the ceiling hung the glass teeth—light that responds to a nod of the head. One of the Nautilus men tapped a panel, and the row of lamps made their polite 3-2-3, as if the garden, too, needed to learn when to breathe.

Conseil held his glass so that the dust felt invited. A shimmer of green detached itself from the edge of a trough and decided tosidewaysto fall, a small impropriety you only notice when you've already seen too much. He caught it with the spirit, screwed it shut, and labeled: "Garden - Particles (green) - falls sideways." His mouth sniffed one of the gutters, not affectionately, just professionally. "Primer," he murmured, and I saw the word written on his hand.

At the end of the troughs stood a rack of bottles, clear and anonymous. The caps on three of them were notched—right, left, center. 3-2-3, the usual joke. Next to it was a narrow blackboard with brass pointers, one for air, one for light, one for work—no words, just directions. The man with the steady hands pushed lightaLine up, leaving the air in peace. The algae responded not with color, but with discipline: The bubbles ran a touch slower, then punctually again. Once the rhythm jumpedincorrectTwo short, three long, two short—a sick hiccup—and immediately, somewhere in my stomach, the machine pulled, bringing the garden back to normal. Ned raised his head. The tank I knew was behind me tapped against metal: not now. The error didn't have time.

We passed tanks, round, silent, with numbers that weren't names: 400, 800, 1000—depth as a calendar. At the base, a bowl of fiber scraps—patterns instead of waste. A Turk's cap so stern that I didn't like looking at it. The bosun ran his knuckle over the edge of a clamp holding the tape. "It's in place," he said, without joy. A regulator released three small, two longer, three small breaths into the line. Not music. Maintenance.

The path to Map Cove was a throat that swallowed numbers. There was no sea inside. Inside laydepthA bare table, with plans on it, lines like isobaths, ridiculously dense, clean as the smile outside in the oil film. No coasts. No names. Only notches, scales, traces of fiber marking paths as if roads were roads in thin air. A line ran from marker to marker, drawn tightly, always turning exactly where the numbers jumped: 600—900—1200. Next to it stood three brass pins, thinner than ours, with a notch in the cap: signatures, cheeky.

Ned stood next to the table, the shaft like a ruler with no teeth showing. He followed the fiber path with his eyes. "Hunting ground," his neck said softly. Conseil held the glass up to the cold light, and the green particle inside behaved as if it could read maps: it slid along the wall, stopped at a number, and stayed there. 1200. He wrote nothing. He let it live on the label.

He came without a sound. Boots sticking—loosening—sticking, helmet down. The tank. He placed a glove on the plan, not heavy, just confident, and stroked precisely along the fiber path, to the corner where the numbers reached double digits, dipped, then rose again. He tapped the table. A finger's breadth westward. Later. He pointed to a spot where the isobaths were closer than patience and traced a tiny loop with the glove. No coordinate. AIntention.

The officer mouthed the wordGoaland left it there, because no one here believes in nouns. The tank tapped the edges of the table—once, twice, three times—paused, twice, three times again. 3-2-3 as a timetable. Then he pointed

to a second line, more delicate, almost ashamed: our corridor from outside, reflected in fiber. The two tongues of oil film lived here as lines of wax. Whoever painted them didn't ask the wind.

On the wall hung a rack of small glass tubes, each labeled with depth and beat. One was empty withPlugThe tank took it, brought it to the map, as if merging two things into one, and put it back. Not a sound. Nevertheless, my neck trembled: three short, two long, three short. I remained silent. My bones are now more concerned with recording than with paper.

We stood close together because this space is noisy from a distance. A Nautilus man adjusted three brass pins on the map. He didn't need his hand. They walkeda touchby itself—ttk—ttk—ttk—until the fiber path was a bit straighter. Ned didn't look. He's tired of renovations. Conseil breathed shallowly so his glass wouldn't miss anything. The tank raised the edge of his hand and drew it slowly from east to west. Full light. Then he pointed to three points on the fiber path that concerned us. Three men, it said, without ink.

I put my hand in my coat pocket and felt what I hadn't put in: a very short piece of fiber with a tiny, clean tuck. I left it where it was. Sometimes clues live longer when you don't know them yet. The bosun stood at the door and didn't count. He only saw the isobaths narrowing, as if the depths were trying to speak. The stoker, who had no business being there, put his hand on the frame and whispered his only word: "Constant." It sounded like a plea to a power that had long since made its decision.

Before we left, the world did its little indecent trick: In the garden outside, visible through the opened bulkhead line, the bubbles in the algae gutters onceperfectIn time. Three short, two longer, three short—simultaneously, row after row, as if someone had pulled on the water from within. Then everything fell back into its normal brevity. The tank didn't look. It already knew. We knew enough by now not to comment. Depth had given us an address. Order the way. The rest was called clock.

The alarm came without noise. The lights were breathing more shallowly, not dark—more objectiveThe polite humming in my stomach changed a nuance, a half-tooth in the gears, enough for my body to correct its posture. No one was running anywhere. The air held the same price. And yet, suddenly, two men stood in the shaft frame, as if the wall itself had spat them out: shiny gloves, blank gazes like a supervisor. Between them, the conductive fiber, taut, clean, with a fresh, tiny bundle that hadn't been anywhere a moment ago. Deadline, that said. Not a word,Condition.

He had been there long ago. Boots sticking—loosening—sticking. Helmet down. The staggering that ends in a straight line. No greeting, just presence. He pointed at us—three fingers—then at the edge of the depths, a short line to the west:nowornever. Among them were the old courtesies: palm down (calm), edge of hand across (clean), two fingers briefly touching the sun, which didn't exist (full light still counts). His watch had no numbers, only willpower.

Ned stepped forward, the shaft like something that would be allowed to run tomorrow. His chin was a yes, his teeth an if. Conseil left the glass in his jacket, labels ready, but his hand lingered a heartbeat too long on the edge of the shaft. He smelled the air, that hospital green, and his mouth wrote without ink: Risk. I stood between them and heard my wrist become a bell: tok-tok-tok, tok—tok, tok-tok-tok. My neck vibrated along. The body signs faster than the head.

The men at the frame removed three short pieces of fiber from a bag, flat and dry. No handcuffs.Consents.One of them placed the band over my wrist, stroked it once, and the band was in place by itself. No click. Just a close-up. The same thing happened with Ned, a little tighter with Conseil—not a punishment, but a measurement. The armor didn't check. HeknowledgeHe tapped each knot with his glove: three short, two longer, three short, very lightly, and the knots responded as if they had lungs.

"If we go down," Ned's shoulder said, "we'll come back up." His mouth said nothing. Conseil coughed up a question that was too big and swallowed it, because questions here carry a toll. I didn't hear my own voice, but I saw her: She stood where men stand who will later claim it was her idea. The tank raised the edge of its hand, slowly, east to west. Full light in a room without windows. Then the open hand into the shaft:Please. Now.

We weren't armed. We could be counted. That was worse. Ned put the shaft down, a touch from the rim; the tip remained behind him, like a dog that's been taught to "stay." Conseil cleaned his fingers on his handkerchief, a ridiculous gesture in its cleanliness, and looked me in the eyes, briefly, directly, as if handing me a list. I nodded. It sounded like paper inside me.

The first step did what steps do when they know they are being looked at: He wascorrectlyThe conductive fiber did not give way and yet carried the force. The edge of the shaft was not cold; it hadIntentionI stepped onto the edge, smelled that little pharmacy that teaches oil to be decent, and saw the panels inside, flush, with the bulge that respects hands. Ned was already beside me. Conseil gently followed. The frame accepted us like things that should be fitted.

Before we got in, the tank placed his palm on my chest, no pressure, just weight. The helmet was so close that I saw a smaller truth in my reflection. He tapped twice, then once, then twice—no different beat, the same, justdeeper. I felt the warmth behind our side—the one that's always a hand—respond, even though it was an ocean away. Two thrusts, one small one. It hit my collarbone. I thought, stupid and clear: They've moved our bell into the body.

A Nautilus boy—too old and too young—stood by the conducting fiber, holding it a breath taut, as if it were a sentence not to be swallowed. He didn't look at us. He had that kind of politeness that comes from work. Behind him, deep in the corridor, stood the board with the three hands—air, light, work, without words. The middle one jumped a notch when we touched the edge. It wasn't a gesture. It was aResolution.

Ned grinned toothlessly. "Later," his breath said. Clean. The tank responded with the smallest movement I've ever seen: a millimeter-by-millimeter tilt of the helmet, barely more than a thought with metal. Conseil lowered his eyelids as if counting his pulse. Three short. Two long. Three short. The friendly alphabet.

Then something happened that sealed the day: On our side—I mean on the ship that we did not see—somewhere a bell rope was pulledhimselfto a half-stroke. I felt it, not heard it. ttk. The band around my wrist tightened a touch, as if it had been blown by the wind. The tank didn't look. He knew that's how you sign.

"Go," no one said. We went. Ned first, as if he had invented the shaft. Conseil after him, small, precise, his labels heavy as manners. I went last, so no one would see when I believe in nothing and act anyway. There was no water beneath our boots, even though there must have been a sea; only smooth metal, behaving like trust. The lamps above us breathed in time, and the room gave way as if it had been working on our pattern for weeks.

We were on the second level when the tank thought again about the map that didn't include the sea. He raised his hand, drew a tiny loop in the air—destination—and then, very briefly, placed his fingers on Ned's shaft. No stopping. A deadline. Ned nodded.finally. The depths nodded along, in our bones.

The final inappropriate detail was small and cheeky: Conseil's closed glass—tucked away in his jacket, safe and sealed—had two dry lines drawn on the inside, so fine they were more like shadows than signs. Not

writing.Intention.They stood next to each other like an N and an A, mirrored, politely wrong. I only saw them because I didn't want to. Then they were just glass again. At the top, on the frame, the new, tiny collar slid along the conducting fiber by half a millimeter and stoodexactlyWe stepped into the depths, and the corridor outside, far away, probably continued to smile its clean smile. Three short ones. Two long ones. Three short ones. We had chosen.

Smoke clouds below deck

It tipped, not loudly, just noticeably. Before, the air smelled of a Sunday factory—clean oil, cold tea, a hint of seaweed—and then something sweet settled over it, a resinous bite that clung to the roof of your mouth like a badly educated thought. The glass teeth on the ceiling hummed, but their light took on a dull rim at the edges, as if someone had roughened the sky with sandpaper. The floor remained honest, vibrating in its double: the pounding of our machines and, beneath it, the polite hum that, for days, has pretended to be nothing more than the climate. Behind it, a sound crept in, one that you don't hear, but rather picks up in your throat: three short, two long, three short.

The smoke didn't come like a curtain. It came as a line. Thin plumes, barely thicker than a fingertip, clung to the ceiling, first straightening and then curving sideways, as if they had an opinion about static. They didn't stay together; they spread out in lines that looked like marked paths on a map no one was allowed to read. The conducting fiber at the bulkhead edge developed that ridiculously small tension you only notice when guilt is on your back. Ned raised his head, Conseil his glass, I my doubt.

He was already there. Boots sticking—loosening—sticking. Helmet down, the old staggering that in the end becomes straighter than any command. He didn't go fast, he distributed speed. A glove to the brass plate—air, light, work without words—and with a single click, the air lowered the price by a fraction. Not a bottleneck,OrderThe lamps listened, dimmed their light a half-step, modestly. At the same moment, the warm hole in our side—the spot that had been playing a hand for days—gripped the edge more tightly. Two spurts, then a third, smaller one. I felt it in my collarbone, and right there, the smoke suddenly tasted less like alarm, more likeIntention.

The crew treated it like weather with rules. A man held his fingertips to the draft at a vent, nodded as if he knew where the wind was allowed to live, and stuck a short piece of fiber into the slat: a small tap, placed so that even an idiot could read it. Open. Closed. Half-open. Three positions that have always amounted to more than ten words. Further back, someone tapped a wall—not a knock, more like a knock—and got the answer back in the metal, politeness in bursts. 3-2-3. Ned took a step toward the bulkhead that led to the garden. The edge of his helmet fell sideways in the air. Not prohibition. Measure. Clean first, then open.

The smoke dispersed, sophisticated enough not to rush. He stayed up above, searching for the cold spots, considering whether it was coming from the panel joint, and with his own laziness, wrote a plan in the corners. Conseil held his glass open a finger's breadth, not greedily, just ready, and I saw a fine, shiny crumb—not soot, a delicate rubbing of resin—hesitate,sidewaysto fall. He didn't decide. He hung in the air like a resolution refusing to sign, and I swore I saw the glass patiently pulling him toward it. Conseil screwed it shut as if he had lured a fly into a line.

The helmet tapped the plate again. Air went a grain lower, light half a stroke. Work remained. The humming in the belly became rounder, not louder, and in the corridor a single pf sounded—not a spark, more like the sigh of a seam that had gotten too hot. No outcry, no commotion. The man at the ventilation slot turned the fiber signal strike one notch; a second man tied a decorative knot on an opposite grate, one so tight he could only say two things:hereandnow. The smoke took the hint and followed him like a polite snake.

"Don't tear it open," his helmet said, voiceless. The edge of his hand cut the air anew, flat, precise. Ned held, but his face remained in the bulkhead gap. The shaft in his hand did what wood does when steel is nearby: It tried to appear important. I smelled the ingredients of the moment—resin, oil film, a thin metal tongue—and the old shipyard inspection whispered inside me: Hot insulator at the joint, garden pipe, just briefly.

The glass teeth on the ceiling began to breathe softly. No flickering, no begging. A clean pulse: down, up, down—in exactly the rhythm you recognize in your jaw when you first realize someone else can count your breaths. Three. Two. Three. The shadows of the smoke plumes did something in this light I wouldn't have liked to see: They ran against the vent and intersected at a point that looked like the center of something that didn't yet have a name. The helmet didn't see it. It already knew.

Conseil put the glass in his jacket, as if it now had a place, not just contents. The officer did what officers do when order sets the tone: He searched for a word no one needs. "Pro—" came the reply, then someone swallowed the vowels out of his mouth; the air was sparse, not stingy, just so sentences were counted. The warm hole in the side of the ship tapped in the metal, more clearly than before. Two thuds, one small. My throat vibrated as if an invisible bell had asked me for my identity.

The smoke didn't disperse, it negotiated. Along the panel seam at the corner—a neat bulge one doesn't like to talk about—it thickened briefly, narrow like a matchstick, and immediately paled, as if someone had offered it money it wasn't allowed to take. The helmet tapped the panel once, and the lamps released the lux for a fraction of a glance—not much, just enough to make a false spark lose its courage. Ned already had the wet cloth in his hand, not out of heroism, out of craftsmanship. He wasn't kneeling. He was just where the work would soon be.

I thought of the bulwarks, of the warm edge, of the hand that has been writing patience in metal for days. The smoke suddenly smelled of that patience, of warmed-up rules. "Calm," said nothing. "Clean," said the plate.

The inappropriate thing at the end was small, cheeky and polite: three thin threads of smoke detached themselves from the ceiling, ransideways—right against the train—and, without stopping, drew three short rings, two larger, three smaller. They didn't hold their breath, they were merely a gesture—and were gone. The same signature vibrated in my throat. Ned was already standing at the bulkhead. Conseil had the label in his hand. The helmet raised the glove.aFingers. The day understood. The air nodded. And the smoke acted as if it were just visiting.

The smoke showed us the plan that no one wanted to write down. It took the corners, tasted the edges, ran along the ventilation slots like a boring thief who nevertheless knows every safe. The men placed fiber signs like signposts in a landscape that could only be understood with the tongue: a single, flat blow meanton, two on top of each otherhalf, the small Turk's captoNo talking. Fingers that have more words than mouths. The glass teeth hung over each grille and did what lamps rarely do: They listened. A breath down, a breath up, each so short that you could only believe it was the neck: three short, two long, three short.

Ned wanted to go to the bulkhead. Of course. The smoke drifted from where gardens are called, and his body can't see a line without checking to see if it's

broken. The helmet was faster than any verb. Edge of hand across, clean first, then two fingers toward the plate. Air half a notch lower, light half a notch darker, work remained, as if effort were the right thing to do today. "It'll suffocate on its own," said the gesture. Ned lowered the shaft, not politely—sensibly. His mouth tightened as if there were sand in the gears, and that was precisely what made him more bearable.

Conseil caught what he could catch. He held the glass into a side current, where the smoke was considering whether to stay, and waited with that patient nastiness that only people who love numbers can achieve. A flake of soot—not black, more brownish with a green blink—broke away from the panel seam andfell sideways, as if the world today enjoys a little cheekiness. He stuck to the spirit wall and stayed there as if he had recognized the place. Label: "Panel K7 – Soot – falls sideways." The writing was small, neat, cold. Paper has manners with him.

A Nautilus man, who had already done too much cleaning, knelt down at the first grate. He held two fingers into the current, nodded, smoothed the fiber around a slat, and madehalfatoAt the opposite shaft, his mirror reversed course. The smoke reluctantly obeyed, but it obeyed. It moved into the center of the field, ran a bit lower, and traced a line in the light that looked as if someone had translated an EKG curve into a metal hairstyle. Behind us, the warm hole in the side of the ship knocked, more distinctly than before: two thrusts, one small. I felt it in my collarbone, as if someone wanted to remind me that skin can also be an instrument.

“Tearing it open will electrocute you,” the helmet didn’t say, but the plate said it: a quick click onWork, onlyaGrain, and somewhere in the belly of the Nautilus, a relay shrugged its shoulders. No noise. Just the kind of silence that is expensive. The glass teeth became a touch duller. The smoke lost its desire to stay upright. What had just been thread turned into knees. A single bright pf moved along the panel seam, a mini-burn, resinous, insulted. Ned was already there with the wet cloth, pressingcleanTo the edge, no heroic pose, just craftsmanship. The helmet allowed it. That was the whole point of grace: not talking the right people out of the job.

We placed ourselves in the backflow, where air does not rule, but gathers ground. The fiber symbols grew into an alphabet. A decorative knot above the lattice onhalfgot a small, ridiculous bow—aPlease, probably: later, again. A second man marked the edge of a frame angle with a brass pin, not large, just enough to help him find his way back when the world started acting as if it

were logical again. Ned saw all this and memorized it because, for him, tongue and steel share the same ark.

"Herbs?" my mind asked, just to make sure that the old, drunken smell wouldn't suddenly take on meaning again. The smoke was resinous, not warm. And yet, it still held a memory of the helmet, of his bottle, of the meticulously clean knife that always acted as if it wereCutan ethic. Nemo smelled of order, even when he stank. That's the kind of truth one doesn't like to write down.

Conseil ran the edge of his cloth over the inside of the glass, not to clean it—to feel the direction. The soot flakes remained.acrosssticking, as if he had no respect for those below. "Sideways," his hand said, his lips saying nothing. I saw his gaze settle on a wall: where the panels were so flush that one would be insulting to describe them. Above the seam was a film, little more than a thought, and in the film stood two lines—not writing,Intention— before they were just air again.

The sound that guided us didn't come from our ears. The plate—air/light/work—gave way so quietly that only our throat and tongue heard the calculation. Air:minus half. Light:minus half. Work:minus oneThe smoke did what stubborn animals do when they notice seriousness: It sat down. The flags shrank to thin veins and converged in a curve that looked like a knot—not an ornament, atraffic jamNed put the shaft against the wall, not pressing, just the frame. "If it jumps, you presshere", his elbow said to me. I nodded. One can spare words when hands do the talking.

From behind, our officer came with a "Pro—" that again hung in the air. The helmet rotated a fraction, enough to command the ceiling to dim its glow. The light didn't dim, it becamemore honest. All that's missing is for the world to apologize, I thought, and I didn't like myself for it. The boatswain that Nemo had built into us ran his knuckle skin along the edge of the grating—an old shipyard trick—nodded and madetoout ofhalf. The smoke thanked like a bad student: late, but accurate.

The garden behind the bulkhead gave another pf, shorter, offended. The wet cloth developed a small brownish-green rim. Conseil held the glass ready. The rimjumpednot; he dissolved andslidin a line away from the cloth, as if spirit had rented gravity on a monthly basis. It settled neatly against the interior wall, looking like the cross-section of a smoldering fire drawn by someone who insists on order.

Ned looked at the helmet. The helmet didn't look back. He tapped the plate with his glove once. The lights breathed 3-2-3. The smoke followed as if it were in class. "You always want to tear everything apart," my look said to Ned, "but today the winner is the one whoturns off.” He grinned toothlessly, and that was approval enough.

The thing that the world is not allowed to have, as always, ended up small. Above a grate onhalfThe fiber lay in a perfect line. I looked, I swear, without blinking, and the bat spunhalf a toothon—without fingers, without wind—until hetowas. ttk. At the same second, three thin threads of smoke on the ceiling moved against the current and formedshort—long—shortbefore they had to behave. My throat vibrated with the same alphabet. The helmet didn't move a millimeter. He had long since known what the air had written.

The glimmer sounded like an offended*pf*Behind metal. No shower of sparks, just a thin, resinous thread at the seam, where the garden breathes through the panels. The smell shifted from "factory clean" to "insulator hot," sweet and sharp at the same time, like an excuse that burns too close to the truth. The glass teeth dimmed slightly; the polite rumble in my stomach grew rounder. The alphabet vibrated in my throat: three short, two long, three short. No one screamed. They counted.

He was already at the plate. Glove, one click: air minus one, light minus one, work minus one—no drama, just organ. The fans switched to obedience, the smoke shrugged its shoulders. Ned was already standing at the bulkhead, cloth in hand, wet and without pathos. The helmet cut the air into him with the edge of its hand, clean and later; then he let him do it. Mercy here means not getting in the way of the right people.

The thread brand tried to remain dignified. Ned applied the cloth, flush, without rubbing, just pressure. No hiss, just a brief taste of resin in the mouth, as if someone had sucked on a workbench. The brownish-green soaked into the fabric like a confession no one wanted to hear. Conseil was there, glass open, a finger's breadth of spirit. He raised it not like a trophy, but more like proof that needed no drama. A shimmer detached itself from the cloth—not a drop, a whiff—rose and settled against the inner wall, as if gravity were in a better mood there.

The men at the grates spoke in a twang. Above the first shaft, the door was half closed, and at the opposite one, half opened. A tiny Turk's cap marked "open again later," and someone put a brass mark on the frame: finder's reward for sober eyes. The smoke took on the new paths, deeply offended but orderly. It

was drawn into the backdraft and began to stumble in a cold corner until it was nothing but flags of fatigue.

The officer took a breath for a "Pro—" and paused. Air was precious now. The helmet tilted almost imperceptibly, and the lights dipped further for a fraction of a thought before returning to service.*Quiet*, said that.*Clean*"The seam answered. Behind us, the warm hole throbbed a little more loudly: two thrusts, one small. I felt it in my collarbone, and it felt like a handshake of approval.

"Yet," Ned's shoulder said, without using his mouth. He ran the cloth along the seam, inch by inch, testing pressure, no heroics. The resinous shimmer gave way, soaked into the fabric, remained orderly. Conseil made mental notes, as always: place, tact, smell. Then he screwed the lid on his jar, label later; the thing remained true nonetheless.

A Nautilus man with steady hands slid to the plate. The helmet nodded him free. Work minus another grain. Somewhere in the belly of the Nautilus, a relay did what relays do when they're not offended: it stopped the jerking. The polite hum remained, but deeper, as if someone had re-oiled their teeth. The smoke waved him off. He had understood.

"Water," no one said, and Ned got it anyway. Don't pour. Put it on. Once again, flush, and the last thin strip, pretending to be entitled, apologized into the rags. The glass teeth breathed a touch brighter; air got half a stroke back; work remained where duty and muscle meet. The helmet looked, just briefly, enough for a:*Passed.*

Conseil handed iodine and gauze to two men, who pretended their eyes hadn't seen the smoke. No gratitude, just carried on. A third rearranged the fiber symbols above the grids, forming a small alphabet:*closed/half/open*in neat succession, as if the clapperboards were sentences. The record nodded to them in time: 3-2-3. The echo answered in my throat, polite and cheeky at the same time.

The thread burn died as decent things should die: without noise, with impact. What remained was a seam ashamed to have been seen, and a cloth that looked like statistics. Ned pressed down neatly once more. The helmet typed back the plate in millimeters: light plus half, air plus half, work plus one. The world resumed its muscles without boasting.

We stood still so the order could listen. The smoke drifted away in thin, offended lines, as if someone had apologized. The men gathered fibers, untied

the plea bundles, and left them half-open in two places—memory anchors. Conseil examined his glass in the glow of the lamps, and for a moment, I saw from within two dull lines on the spirit—side by side, mirrored, politely wrong. Not a word. Intentional. I blinked, and they were just glass.

Finally, the little inappropriate thing happened that sealed the days: On the brass plate, air, light and work were suddenly at exactly the same height—without fingers, without a click—just with a single*ttk*out of the frame. At the same moment, three thin flags on the ceiling moved sideways and dropped into the room, short, short—long—short, as if they wanted to sign that order was extinguished here. The helmet didn't move a millimeter. He knew it. We knew it now, too.

Triage looked like working with bad breath. No alarm, no red flags; just men who owed too much air for a moment. One sat on a crate, back straight, the habit of people who don't complain because it ties their hands. His cough was dry, counted, as if he'd sold his tongue to a beat. Next to him was another, eyes reddened, eyelids dusty with resin. The glass teeth above them dimmed a touch lower and then back up again, politely, as if they didn't want to disturb them, while they counted: three short, two long, three short.

Conseil cleared the world for himself, a tabletop that has no time: gauze, iodine, a vial that whispers of hospital, a bowl of water that knows metal. He didn't speak, he sorted. The first one got the look that never offends: "Eyes." Head back, lid down, water over the edges of the eyelids—not much, just enough to allow the sand and resin to grasp. Then iodine, just a smidgen, at the edges where cracks live. The man blinked stubbornly until order was restored. "Breathe calmly," Conseil's hand said. His voice remained in the instrument.

The helmet was not next to it, it wasbeforethe room. A finger on the brass plate, air half a stroke lower; light remained decent; work rushed down a grain, as if straining effort from a muscle. "Don't tear," said the gesture, "throttle." The hum in the ship grew rounder, not fainter. The officer bruised his lips on a "Pro—" because air was being paid out in coins today. The helmet barely turned, enough to stop the lamp, a breath, lest words become overzealous.

The second cougher had his lungs explained to him. Conseil placed his hand on his sternum as if speaking to wood. "Long," said the pressure. The man tried to obey quickly, coughing sideways. "No." Conseil was not a priest, he was a spirit level. "Long." He let his fingers lie until his body learned that even in times of lackstraightcan be. Then a trick from the shipyard floor: a wet piece of cloth loosely over his mouth, no panic burka, just a filter that shows respect. The

man breathed, didn't count out loud, and we still heard: Three. Two. Three. His throat was a schoolboy.

The warm hole in our side—the hand that hasn't left for days—appeared closer. Two thrusts, one small, this timepoet, as if someone over there had pressed their forehead against metal to hear if we were alive. It reached my collarbone if I held back the words. Ned stood behind it, keeping the world at bay. His shaft leaned against an edge, a good man. He still had the wet cloth in his fist, as if it were a leash that could tame dogs who only call themselves smoke if you're friendly.

A Nautilus man, too tired for theatre, pulled aquieterAirway: Fiber to ventilation—half-, oppositeonThe smoke resented it and obeyed. The thin thread of resin, which had no opinion, still hung over the box. It became paler, thinner, retreated to a cold corner, and acted as if it had always been dust. The glass teeth nodded once, so small that only Guilt saw it. The plate gaveAira breath back. "Paid," said the ship.

Conseil took out his glass, twisted a finger, did not hold it in front of him, butnext tothe men, where air bends when it has had enough. A fine, brown-green spangle did what things do here when order looks at them: He decidedsidewaysHe didn't float, he chose. He clung to the spirit wall and lay flat, as if writing "stay." Label: "Triage – Soot – falls sideways." Small print, room for the truth later.

"If you tie the knot wrong, you'll carry the weight," muttered the boatswain, not referring to the scene. "If you breathe wrong, you'll have to stop." He pointed with the skin on his knuckles at a bench. No punishment.pauseas work. The first cougher nodded, sat down, hands on knees, spine straight, because dignity is a technique. The second pulled the cloth slightly away from her lip, allowing air and order to pass through simultaneously. Her eyes calmed, the edges taking on the iodine like a small, neat lie that helps.

The helmet raised two fingers, then lowered them. The lights answered in the alphabet: 3-2-3. And somewhere in my stomach, a valve sent three little kisses through the line, two longer, three shorter. I realized that my body no longer even asked,whether—he just counts. The officer put his language in his pocket, looked at Conseil, and did the smartest thing uniforms at sea can do:Nodand write without paper getting in the way.

Ned brought water. Not a drink. A rinse. Rim of cup to edge of fatigue. No heroic "Hold on," just the simple math: less resin, more lungs. He didn't sit

down. He stayed so close that the room knew to whom he owed his uprightness. The helmet distributed approval in millimeters:Lightplus half a line,Workplus one,AirThe men breathed a small piece of the future, just enough to continue working if it was required again later.

I smelled the world anew—oil, iodine, resin, metal—and underneath that fine, bold hospital green that holds everything together like a clamp. The glass teeth became clearer. The fiber signs above two grids remained onhalf—Memory anchor, in case the smoke gives you the urge to relapse. Conseil closed his glass, ran his thumb over the label as if laying down heavy cutlery for a truth. The man on the box felt for his pulse, found it, looked up, nodded, as if he understood thatBeatsometimes means life.

The inappropriate thing that Tage signs came at the end, politely and cheekily: A drop of iodine that had just been hanging on Conseil’s pipette dissolved, not falling on gauze, not on skin—itroseHe crawled neatly into the closed glass jar in his jacket pocket, as if someone had built a door there facing the right direction. Ttk. The warm hole in the side of the ship responded with two thuds in the metal, the third small. The men breathed simultaneously.longAnd the lamp above us, at the very top, once madeshort—long—short, so close that one was ashamed to have seen it. After that, everything was back to normal. Order, doing what it can.

Semi-darkness consumed the rest of the pleasant world. The smoke still hung from the ceiling like a thin film of muck, not dramatic, just brazen, and the room smelled of resin, iodine, and that damned factory-floor honesty that sobers you up more than any hangover. The glass teeth above kept their mouths shut, dimmed just a bit, and then pulled back up again, so obediently you just wanted to give them a slap. The old rhythm in your throat—three short, two long, three short—like a bad-tempered schoolmaster counting your ribs.

He placed us in the backflow, where the air is stagnant, the voice becomes too expensive, and truths take up less space. No throne, no theater—just gloves, helmet, boots that stuck, came off, stuck, that damned politeness of metal. A finger on the brass plate—Airhalf a line down,Lighta breath deeper,Workon edge. He didn't even grant us a click. Only this ttk out of the frame that tells you: No one is talking here, hereProceedings.

"What's it about?" Ned's chin asked, his mouth uninterested in letters. The helmet offered no answer, only the edge of his hand—flat, precise: speaking clearly. And then the fingertip against the wall, where the panels sit so flush

that you want to address them informally. Tick-tick-tick, tick—tick, tick-tick-tick. No question. A polite accusation. The smoke moved like a dog that's learned not to pee in the kitchen.

He pushed the map toward us, which does without the sea. Depth instead of places. Lines that look as if they've pulled more teeth than any dockworker. His gloves drew a tiny loop at1200, that damned needle's eye where courage meets mathematics. Then a dash west. Soon. Not "please." Not "possibly." Just the word that lives in his watch:even.

Ned held the shaft loosely, as if it were a walking stick and not a piece of steel that reeked of trouble.full light", said his back. The helmet tilted a fraction, so small you had to hate it. A yes in millimeters. A yes that brings debt. The glass teeth above breathed in perfect time—three, two, three—and I swore the light rolled its eyes.

Conseil held his glass into the side current as if in excuse. He wasn't throwing a show, he was collecting. A fine brownish-green flake detached itself from nowhere, pretended to fall to the left, hung there, made up its mind, moved along the inner wall, and settled flat, like proof that needs no friends. Label later. The look now: clinical, cold. The man has knives made of paper, and not one of them missed.

"What about your men?" my face asked him, without sound. The helmet turned slightly toward the two freshly treated patients sitting at the edge of the crate, their lungs reorganized, their eyes glued to the iodine. A finger stroked the plate:Airin the room remained scarce,Lightgot a breath back,WorkHe stood still like a dog with a good pedigree. They live because order lives, said this damn silence. I would have liked to hate him, but my throat vibrated to the beat, as if my body even thought it was correct.

"Map," Ned growled, silently. The helmet briefly placed the glove on his shaft. No grip. An appointment. A valve vibrated somewhere in the wall.3–2–3like a greased curse. I felt the warm hole in our side—two thrusts, one smaller—and it seemed to me as if a hand had pressed its forehead against the metal over there: Don't be stupid. Or be, but be on time.

The officer took a breath for a "Pro—" and gambled on the air control. He up ahead turnedAira touch down, just so that the wordprotocolsuddenly became like a fat fish stuck in his throat. We watched as the uniform became furniture—usable, but not in demand. Ned grinned toothlessly, a thing you're

only allowed to do when you keep your hands still. Conseil wrote nothing down, thus documenting everything.

"Sabotage?" asked my distrust, which rarely celebrates itself. The helmet didn't look; it knew where distrust resides. He tapped the outer edge of his knuckle against the plate, and somewhere beyond the panels, the system shrugged:Work minus oneThe polite grumbling became a notch deeper, so honest that my stomach told me not to take it personally. The smoke drifted off, offended, in thin threads that had to behave.

Then he moved us closer into the back current, as if to see if we'd stay upright when things got ugly. The helmet in the semidarkness smelled of rum at rehab, of herbal stings, and well-maintained steel—a mixture that teaches men that you don't love them and yet follow them. He typedonceto the card,twiceto the plate, letAira breath free,Lightone line up,Workto zero—and suddenly I heard what makes the world harder than words:Nothing.Only my throat, which eats up the rhythm: three short, two long, three short. Order that doesn't shout at each other, but politely nails you to the wall.

"In full light," Ned finally said, loud enough to hurt. Don't shout. A screw that's in place. The helmet tilted again, that millimeter-yes. I could have kicked him into the sea for those brief gestures. At the same time, it was clear to me: That's exactly what holds the place together. It's annoying when someone's right and doesn't need to pose.

Conseil tapped his glass with his fingernail—tik—and three tiny bubbles dissolved, risingsidewaysand then stood still as if they were nailed to an invisible clamp. The glass teeth above madeshort—long—shortin a whisper. Synchronously. If God had a sense of humor, he would have charged admission here.

"What if it tips over?" my back asked. The helmet displayed the answer on its organ:Airdown,Lightdown,Workdown—three timesNoin a friendly manner. Then he raised his palm toward the shaft, slowly, like telling an animal that it may come now if it doesn't want to bite. An invitation in steel. A request that exists beyond language.

Ned raised the stem exactly one finger, no more, no less. Conseil pulled his coat tighter so his glass wouldn't think it had to become a hero today. I stood up straighter than I liked. And because the world in this box still insists on humiliating you in the end, there came the little trick that no one orders, but everyone gets: On the card, in the cold light, lay two tiny, dull streaks of soot—

side by side, mirrored, indecently polite. Not a word.Intention.They stood exactly where1200And that dirty swan kiss. I blinked, and the plan acted like it had never done anything but annoy us.

The helmet didn't move. He knew it long ago. The plate gaveAira breath back,Lightthe brim away,WorkOne line up. The signature vibrated in my throat. Three short. Two long. Three short. "Morning," no one said. But the room stank just the same.

Cleaning up here did not mean brooms, but fingers on metal and the world makes*quiet*The smoke still hung like thin, dirty wallpaper below the deck, reeking of resin and workbench and the kind of honesty that grinds off your tongue without warning. The helmet didn't make a big show—a wrist, a*ttk*At the plate—air remains scarce, light only a touch higher, work on a leash. Order with bared teeth.

The guys from the Nautilus turned their utterly fine fairy tales into an alphabet of fiber. A symbol above each grid: a flat slap for open, two on top of each other for half, that tight Turk's cap for closed—all so neat it's provocative. One tucked the fiber into the slat like a slap with manners, the next pulled it back half a tooth.*click*, and the airflow ran like a beaten dog. Ned growled at the bulkhead, but held on. His chin wanted to "rip it open," his hands said, "do it properly, you donkey."

The fans moved in unison, not loudly, just precisely. You feel it first in your throat—three, two, three—then you notice the thin threads of smoke turning into musical notes. A bar in the face, but politely. Conseil stood beside him, glass half open, the great vulture in the white coat. A brownish-green spangle detached itself from the air, pretending that gravity was negotiable.*slid*He slumped sideways into his alcohol and lay down against the wall, straight line, like a protocol item that hates you. Label? Later. First, breathe, don't die.

"Right half, left closed," gestured a man with dark circles under his eyes like a dockyard bollard. No romance, just workshop ballet. The smoke listened, spat in a huff, and took the turn as if he were paid to do so. The boatswain ran his damned knuckle over a frame—a shipyard trick from the Stone Age—nodded, and turned the thread half a tooth.*Sitting.*I would have given him a shot if there was still schnapps here. There isn't. There never will be.

The officer started to shout his holy “Pro—” and the helmet turned him with a millimeter*Air down*the vowels. Mercy in the asshole way. The glass teeth above us dimmed a bit, pulled up again,*zack*As if they'd finally realized that nobody

here was into opera. The floor vibrated in a double tonguing: our honest machine, beneath it the polite, tame hum of the depths, pretending it's just the climate.*Yes, of course.*

We moved through the aisles like a bad-tempered orchestra. One of them tied a ridiculously small bow to his waistband over a grate—which translates as:*come back later, you idiot*Another scratched a thin mark on the edge with brass, a reward for tired brains. Ned saw it, memorized it, and shoved the shaft into his hand like a dog sitting by the door and*later*means. The helmet: nod? Not his style. He raised his palm a fraction—exactly the yes you want to strangle him for, yet need.

In the “garden,” the algae soup pushed its puny bubbles, orderly as penal soldiers. Fans counted them together, 3-2-3, the whole*shit*Row in sync. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't felt it in my bones. Conseil held the glass in the side draw, skin like paper, and another flake obediently made its sideways tumble. The guy collects like a graveyard: no one wants to go there, but everyone ends up in it eventually.

We return to the corridor, away from the fine dying. The helmet tips plate,*ttk*'Work gets a grain, light a breath. No God, just the organ. The smoke grew thinner, more offended, retreating into the cold corners like a dog that realizes no one's playing with it today. It clung briefly to a shiny bulkhead surface, just a breath. Then this cheeky magic happened: Two duller streaks of soot stood there, side by side, mirrored, indecently polite. Not a word. Intentional. Exactly where it's not needed. I blinked and hated myself for seeing it.

"Continue," the helmet said with the edge of a hand. We pushed the fiber signs into "secret position"—as if there were something here.*secret*—, vents in sync, grids aligned. The space became clear, sharp, sober like a hangover before a paycheck. The warm hole in the side of the ship—our ridiculous long-distance embrace—knocked more forcefully: two thrusts, the third small,*always*the third small. I swore I felt it in my collarbone, and I also swore I was tired of being right.

Ned braced his back against the wall and watched the smoke obey, the kind of look one uses to start fights and sign contracts. "In full light," he growled, more to himself than to the air. The helmet didn't move. It didn't have to. The plate spoke: Air up a notch, work down a notch, light clean. Order that doesn't embrace you—it clamps you down so you function.

Conseil closed his glass, tapped it once with his fingernail—*tik*—and three tiny bubbles broke away, rose sideways, and stuck to the wall like three stupid numbers that couldn't make up their minds. The boatswain pulled a fiber from the slatted slot, let it*through*The fingers run—dry, bold, new—and laid a sample bundle, small as mockery, perfect as a court. In its tin bowl, the metal laughed again, that quiet, arrogant laugh. I don't like it. I need it.

Finally, the impudence that marks the day: The thin lines of smoke under the ceiling ran against the draft and, for just a breath, wrote short—long—short. At the same time, our fresh mini-bundle pulled itself half a tooth along the conducting fiber—all by itself—and then stood perfectly.*Ttk.*The helmet acted like it was none of his business. Sure. But his damned rhythm vibrated in my throat, friendly like a knife in a hurry. Three. Two. Three. All right, done. Move on.

The smoke had almost cleared, leaving only thin, stinking threads clinging to the corners like rejected debts. The room stank of burnt resin, of iodine, of sweat, of the subtle stench of discipline that always smells like it's just had a tooth pulled. The record up front wasn't blinking, it wasn't even clicking—it was breathing. Three short, two long, three short. The whole damn boat was humming to the same beat, and my throat vibrated like a smuggled gong.

The helmet was there, of course. A helmet is always there. Stick—unstick—stick. He staggered in like a drunk, but ended up standing straighter than any officer who'd ever been allowed to pull out a pencil. A glove on the plate, a click, and the air tightened, as if it wanted to collect fees. Ned grinned crookedly, the stock like a gun just waiting for someone to blink. "In full light," he growled, and his voice was so rusty it almost insulted the metal. The helmet didn't even turn its head, just that millimeter-sized nod that's worth more than all the legal rules.

Conseil drew his glass like a priest draws a chalice, catching every speck of dirt as if it were a relic. And lo and behold, a tinsel detaches itself from nowhere, makes no attempt to fall, flies across the air like a drunk in the rain, and slams sideways into the spirit. It sticks there, straight, clean. Conseil doesn't write anything down; he lets it live on the label, as if order were a shitty lease.

The officer—the poor dog—tries "Pro—" again, and the air steals the consonants from his mouth. I saw him briefly turn green, like someone who realizes he's only good for furniture in this hell. No one paid him any attention. The helmet stared at him, a heartbeat too long, and that was exactly what was

harder than any curse. Some looks are knives that cut you without drawing blood.

A Nautilus guy with eyes so deep that you could hide salt in them stepped up to the plate, turnedWorkA tooth raised. The rumbling in his stomach choked, caught itself, and carried on. No panic, just a growl. Smoke disappeared, as if fed up. I swear, the ship grinned, secretly.

Then came the thing that drives you crazy: Above the grates, where the fiber markings still clung, one of those damned wisps of smoke started running against the current. Not much, just a twitch, but enough for every jerk in the room to know: someone's playing their own tune. Two short, three long, two short. Wrong time. Betrayal or illness, it didn't matter. It stung like a foreign body in the gums. Ned immediately tensed, Conseil pressed his lips together, the officer looked like he was about to pray.

The helmet did not react with noise, it reacted withfrostA single click, and the entire room fell silent. Not silent as a pause, silent as a threat. No vents, no humming, just the throat telling you: Breathe properly or die politely. Two men half-slumped, were lifted back up by the discipline that sorted their bones. Nemo—because, of course, it was Nemo under the helmet—raised the edge of his hand, dragged it across the air. Stay clean, you bastards.

We stood there like children caught stealing. Ned growled deeply; that was his entire statement. Conseil took notes with his eyes, not ink. I held my breath until my throat itself continued to hum the damned beat. Three short, two long, three short. The corridor outside answered with a faint knock in the warm hole of our side, almost like a hand that didn't dare to knock properly.

The last image I had was the small knot on the conducting fiber. A moment ago, it had been well-behaved, but now it had been pulled through the wrong way round with a thread. No accident. A cry for help, silent, small, as dirty as a "Fuck you" scratched into the cell. No one said anything. No one was allowed. The helmet knew. We knew. The air vibrated to the beat, and the smoke acted as if it were long gone. But the wrong loop hung there, cheeky, laughing in our faces.

Beating in the engine room

It didn't even start out big, just a cough, dry as sandpaper, and a knot that was in awful shape. One of the Nautilus guys let the fiber go askew, half a tooth off, nothing dramatic – but in the engine room, where the heat hangs on your neck like a drunken dog and the pipes vibrate like a toothache, something like that is enough to light the fuse. The shift supervisor, a thin bastard with eyes like rusty nails, grabbed him by the collar and snarled about "rules" and "work." The cougher spat on the floor, a black phlegm, half lung, half oil.

And boom—fist. No countdown, no polite 3-2-3 rap. Just a dirty right hand that sent the bastard slamming into the panel seam. Metal roared, teeth gnashed, blood sprayed like a stray blast of steam. The engine room took it personally: pounding louder, humming deeper, as if the damned Nautilus itself was up for a fight.

The men roared. No words, just sounds, like caged animals. Wrenches became clubs, chains became fists with extras. One kicked, one pulled, one laughed too loudly until an elbow shut him up. Oil on the floor made teeth slip faster than fists. I stood in the middle of it all, without a plan, and the stench of burnt resin and sweat clogged my nose, making every breath taste like living in an ashtray.

Ned grinned, that Irish bastard. Finally back to his craft: bone music. He grabbed the shaft, pulled it like a damn drumstick, and thrashed the nearest guy.*Pop*As if someone had crushed a melon. The guy fell, but two others jumped on him, and Ned disappeared in a tangle of curses, boots, and irons. I heard him laugh, bloody, mad.

Conseil yelled at me, not for help, but because he was already halfway out, one of the men, a black eye, a torn lip. "Keep your head up, damn it!" His hands were suddenly both doctor and executioner. Blood ran in streaks down his jacket, and he cursed like a dockworker. "Screw the rules, this is dirty work!"

The warm hole in the side of the ship thudded, harder, faster, as if the metal itself were fighting. Two thrusts, then another, hard, not small—as if the ship itself were clenching its fists. The panel on the side flashed briefly, a tooth popped without anyone touching it. The Nautilus dribbled oil as if it had tasted blood.

I knew at that moment: This wasn't a stupid argument. This was the beginning of something that would count bones, not hours. The engine room grinned, and it grinned with teeth.

Hell broke loose, no God, no orders, just brutish face against brutish face. The engine room roared like an animal chained up too long. Fists, iron, boots everywhere. Oil splashed, blood spurted, sweat burned eyes, and the heat stank like a rusty organ playing out of time. Someone screamed, high-pitched, ugly, until a wrench beat the sound out of his throat.

I got an elbow in the ribs, felt the air rush out as if I'd been kicked by a horse. In front of me was someone with a piece of chain, red-faced, dripping saliva, teeth like rusted nails. He swung, and I ducked just enough so the chain just kissed the wall. Sparks flew, and the Nautilus's hum became sharp, as if it had joined the fight. The guy laughed, so filthy it sounded like breaking glass, and was about to repeat—until Ned showed up.

Ned jumped in, butt-first, and punched him square in the face. The guy toppled over, a tooth flying. I swear, I saw it rolling on the oily floor. Ned stood there, legs wide apart, sweat on his forehead, blood in his beard, grinning. "Finally, some movement in the place!" Then he immediately took a punch from the side, so hard that his head hit the bulkhead. He staggered, but still laughed, like someone who collects punches like tips.

Conseil, the poor bastard, tried to hold his head up, patch up lips, and straighten noses amidst the chaos. "Stay down, you idiot!" he yelled in one man's ear as he stuffed gauze into the gaping wound. Blood splattered on his glasses; he wiped it away with the back of his hand, cursing like a dockworker on speed. "Shit, one more, stay still, you son of a bitch, or you'll bleed to death under my ass!"

The plate on the wall went crazy, as if it had had enough of the show.Workjumped high,Lighttwitched, the lights flickered, making three short, two long, three short, but faster, more hectic, like a racing heart. The entire Nautilus trembled as if it were laughing itself silly at the apes who were turning their gut instincts into a fight.

One of the Nautilus men, a giant with hands like vices, grabbed my jacket, trying to slam me against the panel. I felt his breath, warm, lazy, like booze and anger. I jerked my head away, but he slammed me anyway. Metal against skull, stars in my brain. I thought: This is it, this is it. But my fist hit his neck, right on his larynx, and his wheezing was the most beautiful sound in weeks.

There was a crash behind us, not a shot, just a heavy body on the metal. One fell to the ground, blood splattered on the wall, momentarily creating an ugly

graffiti of red and black. Ned kicked again, because he can, because he has to. And I swear: the Nautilus pounded harder, as if it were applauding.

Then he came. The old bastard himself. Nemo. Or rather: a helmet full of booze, a breath of rum like a fire, the stink of herbs, and that cold, calculating face underneath that tells you, "I'm king, whether you puke or die." He staggered in, boots sticking-unsticking-sticking, as always, but this time with fists in front, not rules.

He didn’t look around, hehandleA guy with a piece of chain—Nemo grabbed him by the neck, rammed him so hard against the bulkhead that metal and bone clashed. Plong. The man crumpled like wet garbage. Nemo left him there, swung around, and caught the next one with a left so ugly that his head snapped back like a hingeless door. Blood on the wall, and Nemo laughed. Not a warm laugh. A drunken laugh, the kind that sounds like someone ripping the lid off a steam engine.

Ned was there instantly. Two animals in the same cage. The Irishman grinned, completely drunk, and Nemo grinned back, rum practically dripping from his helmet. Ned punched first, right in the face – Nemo swayed, staggered, laughed, and then he slammed back. Boom, fist like a hammer. Ned staggered, spat blood, still grinning. "You filthy old bastard!" he roared, raised the butt and struck. Steel against helmet, KNOCK, the whole room vibrated, and the Nautilus hummed lower, as if it were joining in.

Conseil roared over the chaos: "You're insane! You're killing us all, you damned idiots!" He dragged a half-dead man away, pressing gauze over his face, while next to him two men rolled over each other, fists in their guts, boots in their faces. Blood splattered across the floor, mingling with oil, a slippery mirror of vomit, sweat, and shame.

Nemo grabbed Ned by the collar and pulled him up, so close that their foreheads almost collided. "My boat, my law, you whoremonger!" he growled, rum on his breath, steel in his voice. Ned laughed in his face, spat blood on his helmet. "Then read me your fucking law!" And he rammed the shaft into Nemo's ribs. The helmet recoiled, not much, but enough for everyone in the room to know: Two worlds collide here—drunken order and pure, brute force.

The plate on the wall went crazy:Workflickered,Lighttwitched, the lights broke the rhythm. Three-two-three becametwo–three–two, wrong, evil, as if the Nautilus itself were about to lose patience. The warm hole in the side of the

ship struck violently, two thrusts, the third this timenot small, but a blast that almost broke my collarbone. The ship also punched.

Nemo let go of Ned, only to slash his face with his glove. Ned staggered back, blood like a red seal on the floor. But he got back up. Always. And he grinned. Nemo grinned, too. Two lunatics, in the middle of the engine room, and the rest of the world were just extras in a beat-'em-up opera that no one wanted to hear.

The engine room was now a damned battlefield. Screams, curses, metal on bone, oil on blood. Every inch of the floor was slippery, as if some god had dumped a bucket of grease and entrails on it. The engines pounded as if they were enjoying the shit—every vibration a mocking laugh, every blow a drumbeat of a steel barroom brawl.

Conseil was at his limit. The guy, usually so clean, so meticulous with his glasses, was now knee-deep in dirt, hands full of blood, no time for labels. "Hold still, asshole!" he yelled into the face of a half-dead sailor while ramming gauze into a gash that looked more like a burst valve. The guy wheezed, spat blood into his shirt, and Conseil didn't even wipe it away. "Fuck you, die for all I care, but clean it up!" He screamed, cursed, trembled, and yet his fingers continued sewing, quickly, precisely. Medicine rather than cursing with a needle.

Ned and Nemo remained wedged together, two dogs who don't know how to muzzle. Ned swung, fist, butt, knee, everything. Nemo took the hit, staggered, laughed, and struck back like a machine that never learned to tire. Every hit was a thunderclap, every thrust a confession: There are no winners here, only men who don't know when to stop.

One of the Nautilus men, fat and broad as a boiler, grabbed me, trying to ram my head into the rotating valve shaft. His breath stank of booze and tooth decay. I wrenched myself free, kicked him in the knee, heard the ugly crack—he roared, fell to the ground, and I kept punching until my fist had more blood than skin. No heroism, just pure fear turning into violence.

Spirit glasses shattered everywhere, and orderliness was shattered into a thousand pieces. Green soot, fiber, dust—everything was scattered, clinging to sweat, clinging to blood. Conseil yelled at me: "Shut up and help me, or they'll die here!" I pulled a half-dead bastard up from the ground, his face a single red hole, his legs giving out. We dragged him out of the fight, but there was a crash behind us, and the world kept laughing.

The panel on the wall was about to collapse.Workjumped to the limit,Lightflickered like a strobe light hell,Airpumped intermittently. Three-two-three was dead, only chaos. The Nautilus roared as if it wanted to tear space itself apart. The warm hole in the side of the ship pounded in the sternum, no more order, only furious blows, as if the ship itself wanted to see blood.

Then—bang. One of the guys hit a panel with a pipe, sparks flew, and the smoke returned, this time black, stinking, full of menace. Screams grew louder, blows more brutal. Nemo saw this, let go of Ned briefly, grabbed the pipe-wielding weapon, and slammed it to the ground in a single movement. Skull on steel, blood on oil. Silence. At least for a second.

I swore at that moment: If the engine room has a heart, it was just laughing its head off at us.

Nemo now stood in the middle of the chaos like a damned king without a crown, but with fists that were more law than any damn record on the wall. Rum breath, blood on his gloves, helmet crooked, but the eyes behind it glowed like spotlights. He grabbed the nearest one, yanked him up like a garbage bag, and yelled right in his face: "MY BOAT, MY DAMN LAW!" Then he struck, so hard that his teeth rolled like beads across the oily floor.

Ned went in immediately, not intimidated, grinning bloodily. "Your boat? Your ass!" he snarled, and swung the shaft. The blow hit Nemo in the side, dull, like wood against a bell. Nemo staggered, laughed, turned, and punched him in the face. Ned staggered back, blood in his beard, grinning wider. Two animals about to tear each other apart, and the engine room was the damned arena.

Conseil just screamed. "You're going to kill us all, damn it!" as he tried with both hands to free the neck of a half-suffocated sailor buried under a chain. He kicked at the attacker, hitting him in the temple, and suddenly our good accountant was a swearing machine, every sentence a mixture of iodine, gauze, and "Fuck you."

The Nautilus roared along. The record went berserk:Airrushed,Lightflickered,WorkJumped up and down like a heart attack. Three-two-three was dead, only a hysterical roar of clicks, sparks, and vibrations. Pipes groaned, oil dripped, valves whined. The ship was an animal, thrashing along as if it were finally fed up with its own shit.

I took a fist, right on my cheekbone, my eyes filled with blisters. I struck back without looking, felt cartilage break, heard a scream that felt like triumph. I

tasted blood, mine or his, I don't know. The floor was a slide of oil and entrails, and every step was a dance between dying and striking.

Nemo grabbed one of his own men who was going against him, pulled him to the plate, and slammed his head against it until the thing flashed. Sparks, screams, silence. Then chaos again. "EVERY DAMN BLOW HERE IS MINE!" he roared, and the engine room vibrated as if in agreement. Ned roared back, "Then get my face, you son of a bitch!" and jumped on him again.

The men around them were screaming, laughing, vomiting, and bleeding. The engine room was no longer a workplace. It was a goddamn boxing ring in hell, and the Nautilus was the referee, ready to turn off the lights at any moment.

And I swore: The ship laughed. Deep, in the gut, vibrating, mocking. A hahahaha of steel, oil, and blood.

The engine room was tearing apart. No longer a fight—a damned earthquake of flesh, steel, and rage. The machines groaned, the pipes trembled, and the panel on the wall flashed like a madman on speed:Workhigh,Lightflickering,AirPumping, everything out of control. The old three-stroke—three-two-three—had died, drowned in chaos. Instead, a nervous babble of clicks and sparks, like a heart that doesn't know whether it wants to keep beating or whether it should die already.

Ned and Nemo were now nothing but raw animals. Ned, his mouth full of blood, swung his shaft, ramming it against Nemo's helmet, and the clang reverberated through every wall. Nemo laughed, spat rum and blood, grabbed his throat, and squeezed until Ned's face turned blue. Ned kicked, punched, and choked back. Two madmen offering each other death as an invitation. Every blow was a confession, every thrust a testament: there's no turning back.

Conseil? The poor bastard was a patchwork of curses and gauze. Men everywhere with ripped faces, broken ribs, teeth like loose screws on the floor. "Keep still, you wanker, or I won't be able to stitch you up!" he yelled, while simultaneously tamping blood from a throat that spurted out in fountains. His glasses were nothing but red glass windows, but he didn't stop. "Shit, shit, shit!" he cursed, his fingers performing miracles no one could pay for.

The Nautilus raged along. Valves screeched, oil sprayed, a pipe burst, steam shot out, burning like hell. Men screamed, one stumbled inside, his skin burned instantly, and he bellowed like a pig in a slaughterhouse. Nemo let go of Ned, only to grab the poor bastard in the steam and pull him out. A moment of cold

pragmatism: not rescue, butSecuring property. No man shall die before he is finished.

I myself took a pipe, right in the shoulder, a dull blow, pain like a burning nail. I staggered, blood running down my side. I struck back, blindly, hit someone, heard bones crack. A scream, and I knew: that was one down. My stomach lurched, but my hands kept going. The engine room demanded sacrifices, and we were the idiots who delivered.

The record went completely crazy. Lights flickered strobe-like, turning the fight into a filthy dance floor full of blood and shadows. Three-two-three? Forget it. Now it was two-three-two, then chaos again, like a DJ from hell. The warm hole in the side of the ship vibrated so violently that my sternum thought it was going to pop out. No more order. Just brute force, from the ship and the people simultaneously.

And Nemo? The bastard stood there, hands bloody, helmet crooked, and laughed. A laughter of suffocation that rose above everything—above screams, above steam, above the roar of the engines. A laugh that said: This is my boat, my hell, my damned fight. Ned staggered, but he also grinned. Two madmen, two kings without crowns, in the middle of an engine room that was about to devour the world.

Then—silence. No peace, just the kind of silence that follows a bar fight, when all the glasses have been smashed and the lungs have been roared out. The pounding of the engine was still there, clear, but muffled, like a heart that's just decided to keep beating a little longer, even though it doesn't want to anymore. The smoke hung thick and sweet in the air, oil glistened like black blood, and real blood clung everywhere—on metal, on faces, in the cracks in the floor.

The men lay scattered. One was wheezing, one had a face so bruised that you couldn't tell where his eyes were. Another was giggling like a madman, even though his ribs were sticking out of his side. Each of them was more wreck than human. Conseil stood in the middle of it all, his hands red up to the elbows, his glasses smudged, his face twisted like a broken mask. "You're all fucking pigs," he whispered as he stuffed gauze into the nearest gaping wound. "All pigs, and I'm the idiot who's patching you up." He laughed, bitterly, almost hysterically, as he sewed, as if his own life depended on every stitch.

Ned was still standing, swaying but upright. Blood dripped from his beard, teeth missing, his eyes burning. He grinned like someone who has seen hell and

thinks:*It wasn't that bad.*His shaft was bent, full of dents, but he still held it, proud as an idiot with a trophy. He spat a red lump onto the floor, stepped on it, and laughed harshly. "That's it? That was the grand order? Fucking shit."

And Nemo? He stood like a judge. Helmet crooked, fists bloody, rum flag thick as a curtain. He hadn't fallen, not even really staggered. He looked over the men lying half-dead on the ground and raised his hand, slowly, heavily. Not a word, just this nod—like an executioner saying:*Verdict pronounced.*His eyes glowed coldly. The boat belonged to him, the fight belonged to him, even our blood belonged to him.

The panel on the wall quieted down, slowly. Work fell, the light flickered once, twice, then it settled back into its old rhythm. Three short, two long, three short. Order returned, cynical like a policeman clearing the road after a massacre. The warm hole in the side of the ship vibrated softly, three beats, the third small, as if even the ship itself was fed up with our spectacle.

I stood there, blood in my mouth, ribs burning, and knew: We hadn't won anything. We'd only shown how much filth we still have in us. Nemo grinned—a grin full of booze, violence, and that damned domination. Ned grinned back, like a dog who'd rather drop dead than give up. And the Nautilus hummed as if it were laughing at us.

It was over. But we all knew: This wasn't the end. This was just the beginning of the real war—man against man, boat against world, and somewhere in between us, idiots with blood on our hands and shit in our bones.

Mermaids and other hallucinations

The engine room still smelled of blood, oil, and burnt flesh, but the fists had stopped dancing. Men hung around like half-corpses, every breath a curse, every sip of rum a bandage for the soul. I swore the whole damned hull was still vibrating, as if the boat itself were chewing over the beating all over again. Three-two-three, always that goddamn pounding, but now it stumbled, like a heart after too much booze.

We lay scattered, like dogs after a backyard fight. Ned sat on a crate, his beard matted with blood, his eyes red, his grin crooked. "I need women," he slurred, "not steel, not bulkheads, not punches. I need tits, or I'll go crazy." He spat on the ground, a dark red blob, and laughed as if it were a joke. Conseil grimaced,

the good idiot who still acted like he could log his way out of hell. "Shut up, Ned," he muttered, "we're under a hundred tons of water here."

But then it happened. Outside, through the damned glass window, something flickered. At first I thought it was just the sea, waves, refraction, some shit tired eyes see when they stare at steel for too long. But then it was more. Figures. Thin bodies, slender, elegant, and they moved toward us, slowly, like dancers in a dream that reeks of cheap booze.

"Mermaids," slurred one, lying half-dead on the floor, laughing like a child who'd been given back his lollipop. I wanted to smack him, but I saw it myself. Bodies, feminine, curves no man in such a hole could ever forget. Hair that fluttered like smoke in the water. Faces that grinned, but were too beautiful, too smooth, to be real.

The men half-jumped to their feet, as exhausted as they were. "Do you see it too?" one yelled. Another started to howl, then immediately burst out laughing. Ned stood with his legs wide apart, blood dripping from his beard onto the floor. "Finally! Finally, something for the heart, damn it!" He laughed like a madman, raised the shaft, and drummed it against the wall.*Dong, dong, dong.*"Come here, you sweet fish!"

Conseil shook his head, but his eyes betrayed him. He saw it too. And so did I. We were all too far gone, too broken, too full of booze, blood, and oil to distinguish whether the water outside was playing tricks on us or truly giving us a gift.

And the Nautilus? It hummed deeper, vibrating like a brothel about to open its doors. I knew: real or not, one of us would jump after those damned creatures. And then hell would truly be complete.

Ned was completely blown away. The guy was standing in front of the glass, bloody, sweaty, half-broken, grinning like he'd just spotted the Three Wise Men. "See them?! Goddamn mermaids! And you're sitting here like old women, like you're afraid of a little pussy with scales!" He laughed, banging the shaft against the glass so hard the whole boat vibrated.*Dong, dong, dong.*The water outside sparkled and the shadows became clearer.

They were there—female bodies, slender, gleaming, with breasts that almost ripped us out of our boots. But too beautiful, too clean. Too smooth, as if someone had carved them from a drunken dream. Their faces were too

friendly, too close. They waved. They laughed. And their hair waved like flags in a current that couldn't exist.

"I'm getting out!" Ned yelled, spitting blood, and reaching for the lock. Conseil rushed over and grabbed his arm. "Are you completely crazy? There are a hundred tons of water out there! You'll be dead before you can blink!" Ned pushed him away, nearly plunging him into a puddle of oil and blood. "Better drown in tits than die in this stinking metal!"

The men roared. Some laughed, others prayed, one began to sing, off-key, full of snot. "Mermaids, mermaids, take us with you!" His voice was broken, but it matched the madness creeping through the aisles like gas. The boat vibrated, pitched, and I swore the figures outside were moving their lips in time.

I stood there, completely exhausted, and stared out. I swear I saw one of them up close, her face right against the glass. Beautiful, too beautiful. But when she grinned, there were teeth—pointed, far too many, like needles. My stomach lurched. Ned saw only the breasts, only the soft line, only the promise. I saw the grin. And I knew: If he jumped, it would eat him in seconds.

But the bastard just laughed, full of blood, rage, and booze. "Come on, you pretty whores! Get me out of this hole!" His hands were already on the hatch bolts. The Nautilus hummed lower, as if to warn him. Or as if to applaud him.

And we all knew: one more breath and Ned would jump – right into the most beautiful nightmare the sea could ever create.

The water outside boiled like a damned rush. At first they were just silhouettes, soft, seductive, but then they came closer. Too close. The faces dissolved in the flickering light, and the sweetness shifted. Beautiful mouths, yes, but much too large. Lips stretched until rows of sharp teeth gleamed beneath them like needles in a sewing machine from hell. Eyes—not warm, not woman's eyes—but fixed, glassy, cold as a fish market at midnight.

"Shit," I whispered, and my stomach sank. Ned didn't hear, or didn't want to hear. The madman laughed and tapped the glass again. "Look at those boobs! Damn, I'd break both my arms just to go for a spin out there!" He slapped the shaft so hard the window vibrated. The figures grinned back. I swore I saw a hand—slender, white, with fingers too long—press against the glass. Behind it, a cock slid by, not delicate, not sexy, but slimy, with scales that looked like rusty nails.

Conseil staggered beside me, sweating, cursing. "They're not women, damn it, they're fish!" But his voice broke as one of the figures sang. Yes, sang. It wasn't a song, not a word, just a vibrating howl that crept straight into the brain. I saw his eyes soften, how he briefly forgot he'd ever been rational. He immediately squeezed them shut again, but I knew: he'd heard it, too.

The other men? Half-mad. One stood there with tears in his eyes, muttering a prayer. Another opened his pants as if he were about to relieve himself right at the window. "Take me," he whispered, "I'm yours." A blow from behind ended his show; someone still had some sanity. But the laughter, that dirty laughter, remained.

The windows flickered in the lamplight, the panel on the wall clicked nervously. Three-two-three? Forget it. Now it was short, hasty bursts, like a racing heart after too much rum. The ship played along with the madness, and I swear it vibrated to the same rhythm as the singing outside.

I stood there, sweat on my forehead, blood in my mouth, and couldn't look away. One of the figures turned, revealing its full length: dream above, nightmare below. Breasts like promises, belly like skin, but from the waist down, just tail, scales, fins. And where the tail ended, there was a stinger, sharp, dripping, poisonous. And she smiled. I knew: not a dream. A lure. A damned promise of death.

Ned only saw the breasts. I saw the teeth. Conseil heard the singing. And the boat vibrated as if it wanted to laugh at us all.

It was like a fucking fever dream, except no one could sleep anymore. The guys were hanging in front of the glass, drooling, yelling as if they'd finally seen tits again in some harbor. "They're laughing at us!" one yelled, covered in blood, half a tooth still in his mouth. "They want us!" - "They're going to fuck us to death," another wheezed, laughing like a madman who doesn't care anymore.

Outside, they swam closer, those filthy goddesses of booze and hyperbaric chambers. Breasts like a promise, skin smooth as oil in the water, but underneath... fins, scales, a tail as long as a nightmare. Hair fluttered like nets full of seaweed and carcasses. And the mouths, damn it, the mouths grinned wider and wider, until the needles became visible. Rows of teeth, sharp, clean, too many. A smile that cuts.

Ned completely lost it. He banged the shaft against the glass, his grin bloody and wide. "Come here, you damned princesses! I want to feel you! I want to

grab you!" He spat against the glass as if he could break through it. The other men laughed, one howled, a third seriously pulled down his pants and screamed, "Take me!" until someone rammed a fist into his face.

Conseil stood next to me, pale, sweat on his forehead. "This isn't real," he whispered. But I heard it too: that chant. Not a song, just a vibrating howl that crept straight into your brain, made your balls squirm, made your bones dance. His mouth mumbled words he didn't even want to say, some stupid prayer in French. Then he bit his own lip until blood ran, just to stay clear.

I couldn't look away. One of the things pressed its hand against the window—too many fingers, too long, skin slippery, almost transparent. Behind it, a second beast swam by, showing off its entire length: breasts like something out of a porno, belly flat as a lie, and then that tail, slimy, scaly, with a damn hook at the end, dripping like poison. And the eyes? Not female, not human—cold, rigid, like two nails in your skull.

The boat vibrated with it. The lights flickered, the old three-stroke engine was dead, now it was a flurry of clicking, like a racing heart after an overdose. Three-two-two, two-three-three, all jumbled together. It felt as if the Nautilus itself was feeding the madness.

"Jump, Ned!" one yelled. "Jump and fuck her!" - "Jump and die!" another shouted, and the crowd laughed, roared, and cried. Ned already had his hands on the bolt, his eyes full of madness, full of greed. I knew if he pulled the bolt, we'd all be done for.

And outside, they grinned. With teeth that looked like freshly sharpened knives.

Ned had both hands on the latch, his face glistening with blood and sweat, and his laughter was pure insanity. "I'm getting out, damn it! I'm swimming with those whores! I'd rather be eaten by a mermaid than die in this stinking metal!" He pulled the bolt, the window vibrated, and the whole boat groaned like an old whore who'd been hit too hard in the back.

The men screamed in confusion. One yelled, "Open up, Ned! Let them in!" Another howled, "We're dead if you do, damn it!" One knelt on the ground, muttering prayers, blood running from his nose. And outside, these figures were glued to the glass, their breasts bouncing like promises and their mouths full of knives that looked like invitations.

Conseil threw himself at Ned's side and grabbed his arm. "Let go, you bastard! They're not women! They're beasts!" Ned shook him off so violently that he almost slammed into the machine. "Shut up, Conseil, you cowardly pissant! I want it! I want in! I want her!" His shaft slammed against the wall.*dong*,*dong*as if he were a drummer in a hellish band.

I looked into the water and felt like throwing up. One of those things was grinning, lips curled up to the gills, and beneath them, teeth, sharp, shining, wet. Her belly was beautiful, her breasts perfect—and right beneath it, a crack opened, slippery, too big, much too deep. It wasn't a promise, it was a damn mouth. She rapped on the window, friendly, as if she were inviting Ned to a dance.

"They're singing!" one of the men shouted, and he was right. The howling outside grew louder, vibrating through steel, through skin, straight into my brain. My bones kept time, my tongue vibrated along. Three-two-three, over and over, as if we were the puppets and they were the damned puppeteers. I wanted to scream, but my voice froze.

Nemo finally stepped up, helmet askew, rum breath like a slap in the face, and laughed. An ugly, drunken laugh that filled the entire room. "Jump, Ned!" he roared. "Jump and fuck the fish! They're waiting! But watch out—they'll take you down and they won't let go." His voice was full of mockery, full of drunkenness, full of power. "Those aren't women, that's the sea telling you to fuck off."

Ned yelled back, blood in his mouth, his eyes wild. "Then I'll fuck the sea, damn it!" His hands pressed tighter on the lock, and I swore: one more breath and the bastard will drag us all to the grave.

And outside? They continued grinning. Breasts like salvation, mouths like the mouths of hell.

The pane sang like a thin rib about to break. Ned hung on the latch, blood and sweat dripping from his chin, and his laughter was the soundtrack of idiots challenging God himself to a duel. "Up!" he yelled, "I want out! I want to kiss the fish until they bite me!" He pulled. The bolt moved a millimeter—enough to make the whole damned hull growl.

Conseil clung to Ned's arm, white-faced, eyes red from the steam. "Let go, you bastard! That's water out there, not a whorehouse!" Ned yanked him away, sending him crashing into a pipe. I jumped in, grabbed Ned's shoulder—and it

ripped through my bones: the singing. Not a song, just pressure in musical form. The sea reached into me like a pocket, rummaged through it, found my pulse, and turned it. Three—two—three, only deeper, dirtier, like a stomach-churning bass.

Around us, men resembled the inventory of madness: one howling, one laughing, one unbuckling his belt. "Take me!" he rasped until someone stuffed his face in the mouth. Another prayed until the rum stole his words. Outside, these things clung to the glass—breasts like salvation, hair like seaweed from hell, beneath them a tail and scales and teeth, too many teeth, each one a reason to die stupidly.

Nemo stood in the doorway, grinning, drunk in his pores, contempt in every pore. "Come on, Irishman," he growled, "jump. Show them how to run blindly into their mouths and call it love." He laughed deeply, so deeply that the machine in his stomach laughed along with him. Not an order, just mockery that cut sharper than any knife.

"Eat me, sea, I'll eat back!" Ned roared. His hands became bony on the steel, the bolt went one more tooth. The windshield vibrated; the boat made this ugly*uuuhh*, as if it were both briefly horny and nauseous at the same time. The record spun freely: air pumped in bursts, light strobed, work leaped like a heart on speed. Strobe light on oil, skin, blood—a disco of dirt.

I hooked my forearm under Ned's armpit, Conseil moved to the other side, we clung to him like two bad decisions. "LET. GO." I screamed until my voice took on a taste. "Right now!" Ned howled, and outside, one of the Holy Whores opened her mouth so wide that I saw my own death in the reflection. A second mouth, where it shouldn't be, slimy, dripping—not a promise, a maw.

The warm hole in the side of the ship pounded against my sternum, first two blows, then three quick, off-beat beats. The ship was panicking or having fun—it didn't matter, it vibrated as if it were playing dealer in our sinking. A Nautilus man leaped forward, trying to help, slipped in the oil, crashed down, and continued laughing hysterically, because laughter and death share the same tongue here.

"NED!" Conseil bit himself bloody to stay clear. "They're singing you STUPID!" Ned grinned, blasphemously beautiful in his idiocy. "Then I'll sing back!" He pulled—and then I did something that wasn't smart, only necessary: I rammed the side of his head against the steel, right behind the ear. A dull thud.*Pock*His

grip loosened. Conseil twisted his fingers, and I pushed the bolt back.*Ttk.*The lock snapped shut like a vicious dog that finally has its leash back.

Ned didn't slump. Of course not. He gasped for air, spat blood in my face, and laughed anyway. Outside, one of those things pressed its hand against the window—fingers too long, skin too smooth—leaved a greasy trail, and wrote a polite "come on" in slime. I wanted to scream. Instead, I stared.

Nemo clapped once, slowly, cynically. "Cowards with brains," he said hoarsely, "do exist." Then he tapped the record. Air caught a breath, light a line of calm, work remained looming like a threat. "Another one pulls the bolt," he growled, "and I'll let the sea decide."

The lamps took note, dimmed, raised, 3-2-3—finally, properly again, but with the twitch of a cat. Outside, the things turned away, smiling with knife-toothed smiles, as if they'd just been eyeing us up. The boat sighed. Ned breathed. So did I. Conseil wiped his mouth and whispered a disgusting, wonderful word: "Later."

Finally, the small impossibility that marks the days: On the inside of the pane, two dull, circular spots remained where no hand had been. They stood next to each other, mirrored, politely wrong—and dissolved upwards. After that, there was only water again. And us, who had barely missed it.

The calm that followed smelled of metal and regret. Not peace—a hangover. The lamps breathed their tame three-beat rhythm again, as if no one had just tried to marry the sea into it. Ned leaned against the window, blood in his beard, his gaze empty like an empty bottle that has held on to hope for too long. Conseil held him by the elbow, as if the guy were a machine that could die if you took your hand away. Outside, there was only water. No breasts, no hair, no singing. Just black and that oiled shimmer in which men find their stupidity.

Nemo stepped forward, helmet askew, rum flag like a marriage vow with hell. He raised his hand, and his glove made more law than any plate. A finger onAir, a stroke of calm.Lightgot decency.WorkHe stayed high because threats taste better when they're standing still. "Anyone who fiddles with bolts again," he growled, his voice sandy, "starting tomorrow, they'll be talking to fish. From the inside." No yelling. Just the kind of sentence that slams a door in your head.

The men were silent. One giggled, so thin it was almost childlike, and stuffed his laughter into his own pocket. Another swallowed a prayer. Someone wiped an oily hand across his face, as if he could rub the image off the water. Ned

grinned wearily, crookedly, like someone who's lost and doesn't want to admit it bothers him. "Would have liked to kiss her anyway," he slurred. Conseil pressed his lip together, tore a "snout" from his teeth that sounded like sewing.

The record didn’t click at all, itknewsimply, where to. 3-2-3 hammered into the walls, into the floor, into my damned sternum. The warm hole in the side of the ship responded with two thuds and a small third, decent as always, and I thought: Maybe the ship has a sense of humor. Maybe it's just tired of us.

"Mermaids," someone spat on the floor. "Mermaid shit." He stomped his saliva around, and the oil formed a secure frame around it, as if it were label. Someone gathered the last traces of rum, put the bottle away like evidence. And yes, of course the uniform came and coughed up a "Pro—," and of course the word died in his throat before it could be finished. Order here isn't paper, it's a fist with a glove.

Nemo didn’t point outside; he drewinside. Edge of hand facing west, slowly. Two fingers up:full lightThen he tapped a number into the air, signifying depth, not hope. Space understood. Space had long since learned it: first hunger, then course, then risk. Ned nodded, disagreeing—knowingly. Conseil breathed like a man who knows that his work will later be called blood again.

"That wasn't real," I hissed to myself, because I like to save stories that live in my head. My skull laughed dryly, as if it were old enough for cynicism. I looked at the pane: clean, cold, just our mirror, three notches from the shaft that the Irishman had just drummed into it. And then I swore I saw on that same pane two dull spots, side by side, politely fake, like those goddamn lines that always appear when intentions take over the room. I blinked, and they were gone. Sure. All right.

A Nautilus boy emerged from the corridor, much too still, with fiber on his fingers. He smoothed the slat above the vent.half, put a mini bow—later again—, not looking at anyone. His eyes had the gray of people learning to disappear quietly. When he turned around, I saw a bundle on his palm, wrapped backwards. Not an accident. Message. Help, only no one here has time to spell it out.

"Everyone out the window," growled Nemo, and yes, the sentence was stupid, but everyone got it. Away from the glass. Away from the song. Away from the kind of longing that makes you softer than water. The men trolled, making room for air, not courage. Ned stayed a second too long. Conseil pulled. The Irishman left, reluctantly, like a dog that hates the door at its back.

We began to move, corridors, bulkheads, machines, the old, honest pounding. It was damned soothing, so much so that I resented it. A man coughed, another counted blows in the air, perhaps in consolation, perhaps in punishment. There was still Event everywhere—blood, rum, mucus—and everywhere, order acted as if it came alone. I stepped into a narrow trickle that didn't belong there, cold, salty. Water. Just a finger. Nothing. Or too much.

"Gas, pressure, booze," Conseil muttered, more to his tongue than to me. "The sea makes men stupid." "Or honestly," Ned grunted, without humor. Nemo didn't laugh. The bastard laughs when we want to die, not when we think. He just tapped a plate, somewhere in his belly, and the Nautilus nodded in time like a judge who's right too often.

Just before we left the engine room, the cheeky little magic that marks days happened. A very faint tok-tok—fromoutsideI stopped. No one should have heard it, but my bones had ears. The glass window—just a moment ago clean and empty—received a sign in the middle, not large, not loud: a circular imprint, shiny, as if ahandlain where none could be. Not long. Just a breath. Then the circle dissolved—upwards—and was gone.

"Onward," said Nemo, and the word tasted of steel. Ned spat, barely missing my boots, and grinned toothlessly. Conseil pushed his glasses tighter on his face, pretending he hadn't seen. I remained silent because silence lasts longer than consolation. Behind us, the slab made its gentle 3-2-3, as obedient as a school lesson. Ahead of us lay the west. Deep. Full light. And somewhere, in the water that has neither women nor dreams, something laughed without a voice.

Drunk to delirium

It started as always: one bastard grins, another brings in bottles, and suddenly everyone's brothers because it smells like rum. "Special ration!" someone yelled, his teeth half-knocked out from the last row, and the first cups slapped onto the oily tables. It was no celebration, no thanks—just the cheap solution for men who've smelled too much blood. We fell over because we had no choice.

The first sip burned like lighter fluid, bitter, chemical, as if someone had poured lamp oil into the rum. Ned laughed his head off anyway, smashed the cup, and slammed it down on the tin. "Burns? Means good! Screw taste!" He wiped his mouth, spat on the floor, and roared as if he'd just licked the devil himself. The men hooted, yelled, and sang something no one understood.

Conseil raised his cup, sniffed, and grimaced. "This isn't rum, it's poison." He started to put it down, but Ned grabbed his hand, squeezed, almost forced him to take a sip. "Come on, Professor! A sip doesn't make a corpse." Conseil tore himself away, growled something in French, and invisibly wrote "damn" on the table with a finger full of sweat.

I drank because resistance sounds like a joke here. The broth ate down my throat, burning holes in my stomach. My head pounded in three-beat, three-two-three, but each beat stumbled, as if my heart had already drunk itself. The room flickered, the glass teeth above breathing in unison, lamps down, up, down—as if they were on the same drunken trip.

The guys kept tipping. One set up cups like small coffins, one sang, one howled, one laughed like a madman until he threw up. Oil, vomit, rum—everything mixed together, the floor so slippery you had to be careful not to break your skull on the machine. And Nemo? He was sitting in the back, helmet half off, bottle in hand, grinning. Not a word. Just that grin that tells you:*I wanted all of this to happen.*

I wanted to sleep, I wanted peace and quiet, but my veins felt like someone was playing with electric shocks. The voices in the room became deeper, more distorted, as if they weren't coming from throats, but from pipes. One man swore he heard laughter coming from the steel. I believed him.

And then I saw it: a drop of rum that had fallen onto the table next to my mug didn't roll down, but slowly rolled up the edge, stuck, and shone as if it were proud of having fucked gravity.

The bottles came pouring in like rain, no one asked where they were from. Clean labels, neatly stuck on, like something from a harbor store – but the smell was wrong. Resinous, sweet, acrid like solvent. One pulled the cork out with his teeth, spat it on the ground, and tipped it over. He choked, grinned, and raised the cup: "It's working!" The men roared. Everything was a triumph as long as it was burning.

Conseil was the only one who bothered to hold the bottle up to the light. "That's spirits, you monkeys," he growled, "not rum." He sniffed, coughed, and shook his head. Ned nearly died laughing. "Spirit, rum, schnapps—all the same! The main thing is it clears your brain!" He snatched the bottle from his hand, took a sip, drank, and then slapped his chest so hard he almost vomited. "That, boys, is medicine!"

I took a sip too, because resistance here seems ridiculous. Bitter, sticky, as if you'd just drunk paint. It tightened my throat, and my stomach immediately rebelled. But I laughed along, because this was the game: He who laughs lives. He who doubts dies.

Conseil fumbled with his glass, carefully tipping a fingerful of the muck into it. Something floated there. A flake, brownish-green, like burnt resin. At first I thought it was sinking. But no—the muck spun, slowly sliding.sidewaysalong the wall and stuck to it as if he had booked a seat. Conseil pulled the glass away and wrote with his finger on the frosted metal: Ration – suspicious. I read it, but pretended I hadn't seen it.

Ned continued to roar, tipping cup after cup, snatching bottles from others' hands. "You're cowards! Burns? Means it works! Tomorrow you'll be new men!" He laughed so filthy that half the crew joined in, even those who were already glazed over. One fell over, just like that, head against the wall, looking dead. "Just sleep!" Ned shouted, kicking him in the boot. No reaction. "Sleep deeper!" He laughed, roared, drank.

The glass teeth above flickered as if they were watching us. The plate clicked softly,Air −½,Light down,Work constant– like a warning voice who knows that an orgy is headed for ruin. But no one listened. Not in this stinking, sweat-soaked room full of booze and self-deception.

And me? I took another sip, tasted chemicals and death, and laughed along because it was the only thing left.

There was a sudden rushing sound, not from the bottles, but from the pipes. As if the ship itself had begun to laugh. Muffled, tinny, deep – like voices living in the steel. The men heard it too. One stared into the wall, grinning with a salivating mouth: "They're talking to us!" Another giggled, banging his cup against the pipes until it sounded like a broken bell. And the Nautilus really did respond, vibrating as if it were reflecting back each cup's blow with a sneer of its own.

The plate in front clicked.Air −1, quite clearly, as if it wanted to rein us in. But no one understood, no one wanted to. Instead, the voices grew louder, the hands wilder. Men roared, sang, one vomited in the corner and laughed, as if it were a contribution to the song. The pounding in my throat—three-two-three—stumbled now, coming too fast, too short, as if the sea had decided we should die sooner.

The glasses were given fibre signs, as if someone had invented a drinking alphabet: one line =on, two =half, node =toSome held their cups up to get more, some kept them hidden, as if trying to save air. Ned? Ned just tipped everything, no matter the sign. "If it burns, it's good!" he roared, his eyes sparkling like broken glass.

Then the first one toppled over. No laughter, no scream. He was sitting, drinking, grinning—and suddenly toppled over. The cup clattered against metal, his head hit the floor. Silence for a breath. Ned kicked his boot, nothing. He kicked harder, still nothing. "He's asleep," he slurred. "He's sleeping deeper, the lazy dog." The men laughed, but the laughter was thin, brittle.

Conseil lunged forward, jerked his head up, yelled curses, shook him, and punched him in the face. Nothing. Just a rasping hiss, like air escaping from a leaky pipe. "Damn it!" Conseil screamed, "that stuff is eating him from the inside!" He grabbed a bottle, sniffed it, and grimaced as if he'd licked paint.

I swear, I heard the ship laughing, deep, mocking, right into my chest. And the lights above flickered like a strobe light in a whorehouse. The glass teeth breathed in the wrong rhythm—two-three-two—as if they were now part of the party.

And Ned? The bastard simply knocked back another one, blood and rum mingling on his chin, and he shouted, "He just couldn't handle enough! I'm drinking for two!" Then he laughed, laughed loudly, laughed dirty—and the whole ship laughed along.

The walls began to sweat. Not water, not condensation—rum. Thin trickles, sticky, sweet, running over metal, dripping onto the floor, and mixing with oil and blood. I wiped my hand over it, smelled it, even licked it—and yes, it was rum, but so disgusting that my stomach immediately rebelled. "Shit," I whispered, and my heart stumbled. Three-two-three was gone. Instead, a shitty two-three-two, like a heart that decided to play a trick on you.

The lights flickered. First just a faint whisper, then they flickered like a strobe light. Every breath was a photograph: grinning faces, open mouths, slobbering tongues. Men staggered, laughed, yelled, as if they were no longer human, but puppets, pulled by alcohol and madness. Ned stood in the middle, legs wide apart, cup in hand, grinning like a demon. "See? Everything's floating! Everything's alive!" He raised his arms as if he were a preacher, and at the same time vomited all over his boots. Then he laughed even louder.

Conseil was chalk-white, his hands shaking, his glasses covered in drops. "Not real... this isn't real..." he muttered, but his eyes betrayed him. He, too, saw the patterns. Lines in the steam forming shapes. Letters, words, whole sentences that only he understood. He bit his lip, blood running down his chin, hoping pain would ground him again. "Shit, shit, shit," he cursed, trying to wipe away the symbols. But they came back, in the fog, in the light, in the oil.

The men danced. Yes, danced. No rhythm, just twitches. One fell, got up again, blood poured from his nose, and he laughed as if it were the joke of the century. Another ripped open his shirt, ran into the wall, again and again, until his forehead was exposed. "I hear them!" he yelled. "The bottles are singing!" And indeed—the clinking was there, a sound, high and clear, like glass that doesn't break but takes on voices.

I swore I saw two letters in the condensation on the bulkhead edge:N/AMirror-imaged, blurry, but there. I blinked, they scattered, then came back. Maybe just drunk. Maybe not. Ned saw it too, pointed at it, and slurred: "Means... night! Means... another cup!" Then he downed half the bottle, giggling like a child being given back his toy.

The plate in front clicked, inconspicuously,Work −1,Air +½. Order acted as if it wanted to save us. But the lamps laughed. And the steam continued writing, quite calmly, as if this were no longer just a drunk, but a damned message.

And me? I stood there, my head full of static, my throat full of poison, and I knew: we'd all been over the edge long ago. Delirium had us by the ass.

The first convulsions came quietly. No drama, no scream—just someone who could no longer hold the cup. Fingers clutched as if they were iron, and then he simply fell over, his whole body convulsing, foam at the mouth. "He's dancing!" someone yelled. "Shit, he's dying!" Conseil corrected, jerking his head up. Blood, rum, and vomit ran together, and Conseil screamed like a madman: "Shut up and bring me water!" But there was no water. Only more rum.

Another fell over, blind, eyes wide open, pupils fixed. "Dark!" he screamed, "everything's dark!" The lights glowed brightly, strobe lights over oil and sweat. Ned laughed and patted him on the chest. "This is what freedom looks like, you jerk! Close your eyes and enjoy it!" The man wheezed, arched his back, and Conseil punched him in the face until he caught his breath. "Damn it!" he growled, "that's not rum, that's fucking poison!"

Ned tossed another one anyway. His hands were shaking, but he grinned as if he'd outsmarted the devil himself. "If it kills me, I'll laugh right in his face!" He raised the bottle, tipped it, red ran down his chin, and he laughed until he almost choked. "More, you dogs! More!"

Conseil raced through the room like a doctor in a brothel. He snatched away cups, slammed bottles to the floor, shouted in French and German, cursed in every language he knew. He forced his finger down one's throat, puke, get some air. He mixed real alcohol—medicinal, clean, burning—into their mouths to at least dilute the poison. One man hit him, he dodged, shouting, "Then die, you bastards! But not in my hands!" And yet he continued to mend.

The plate on the wall played along.Air +½,Work −1,Light stable– like a nurse cynically adjusting the drip. Every click was a judgment: you can, you can't. And the boat hummed, as if it wanted to assist Conseil, not out of kindness, but because it didn't want to lose its toys just yet.

Then Nemo. He was sitting in the back, helmet tilted, bottle in hand, rum breath thick as fog. And he laughed. Not a full-blown outburst, just this deep, ragged laugh that was more like a knife than fun. He raised his glove, tapped the record.Work −1,Air +1A millimeter of mercy, nothing more. "He who dies, dies," he said, "he who drinks, drinks. The sea only takes what it wants."

Conseil yelled at him, waving his bloody hands. "You bastard, this is your boat, your rations!" Nemo grinned, raised the bottle, and drank. "All mine," he said. "Even your deaths."

And at that same moment, another fell, twitched, perhaps died, I didn't know. But the record clicked again, gently, almost like a lullaby. And I swore the ship was humming in the wrong time, as if counting the bodies.

Nemo sat down in the middle, helmet half off, bottle in hand, as if this were a fucking audience. His eyes glowed, rum glistened in his beard, and his grin was sharper than any knife. Men lay around him, half-dead, twitching, gasping. One was drooling, one was singing without words, one beat his forehead against the ground until blood spurted. Nemo raised the bottle, drank, belched, and said: "The sea doesn't forgive. You wanted to forget. You deserved it."

Conseil raged, cursed, and snatched the cup away from someone who was groping half-blindly in the corner. "It's poison! Sabotage!" He held up the bottle – and there you saw it. The bundle of fibers at the neck was knotted backward, roughly, twisted. No accident. A shit sign. Ned laughed, staggered, and pulled

up another bottle, the same damn fiber, backward. "Screw knots!" he slurred. "As long as it pops, it's real!" He tipped over, coughed, spat blood, and grinned as if he were in love.

"Sabotage," Conseil growled, "or your goddamn test, Nemo." But Nemo didn't react. He sat there, helmet on his neck, grinning like a judge who already sees heads rolling. His hand rested on the plate, and it clicked along.Air +½,Light down,Work stableNo panic, no rescue, just millimeter shifts, as if he were drawing the delirium with a ruler.

I didn't drink any more. I couldn't. The stench alone was enough to make my stomach churn. But my bones trembled because the boat vibrated. Not in three-beat, not even in the wrong one. It hammered. The warm hole in the side throbbed, hard, brutal. Two blows. Pause. Then a third—not a small one this time. A crack that made my sternum vibrate. Like a punch from outside. A warning. Or an invitation.

The men groaned, laughed, and howled. One crawled toward the window, slobbering about "mermaids" and "They'll get me." Ned roared, Conseil yelled, Nemo grinned. And the ship? It hummed, laughed, and throbbed—as if it were fed up with people who think they can drink to forget the sea.

And somewhere in the chaos, I noticed a second bottle. Clean, shiny, as if it had only just come into play. Same fiber, tied backwards. As if someone were intentionally leaving a mark. Not a coincidence. Not bullshit. A message.

Nemo drank, belched, and tapped the record. "You're mine. With skin. With booze. With blood." And the Nautilus nodded, vibrating, quietly, mockingly.

The night—if it was night at all—tore into our skulls like a rusty drill. At some point I heard Ned yelling, at some point I heard Conseil cursing, at some point I heard Nemo laughing, deep and dirty. After that, there was just a black hole. No sleep. No dreams. Simply nothing. A blackout so thick that time itself fell over drunk.

When I opened my eyes again, I didn't know if hours or days had passed. The lamps burned dimly, glass teeth obediently chiming in three beats, as if they had never twitched. Three-two-three, perfectly clean. The ship hummed like a well-behaved dog that acts like it hadn't torn up furniture yesterday. But all around me, it looked as if the devil had crashed the party. Bottles everywhere, empty, half-full, broken. Men on the floor, drooling, gasping, rigid. Two were missing altogether. Not a word, not a trace. Simply gone.

One sat in the corner, eyes open, pupils fixed. "Dark," he whispered over and over again. "Everything's dark." But the lamps were almost blinding. Another sang, without words, just one note, over and over again, as if delirium had robbed him of his speech. Conseil limped through the corpses, bloody hands, eyes red as fire. "Two missing," he growled. "A third blind. You bastards almost killed yourselves." He kicked a bottle, which rolled and clinked like laughter.

Nemo? The bastard sat there, helmet on his knee, bottle empty, grin crooked. "Whoever's still standing belongs to me," he murmured, "whoever's missing belongs to the sea." No judgment, no remorse. Just booze and possession. His hand tapped the record, and it clicked.Work stable,Air +½,Light cleanAs if nothing had happened. As if he had just finished a school lesson.

I staggered, my head pounded, my stomach burned like a rusted oven. Rum was sticking everywhere. On my skin, on steel, in the air. And then I saw it. Conseil raised his glass, wanting to test if the spirit was still good. A drop rose. Not down, not sideways—up. A clear drop of rum, slowly, stubbornly, climbed the glass wall and stayed there, as if it had the right to do so. Right next to it ran a fine line of slime, like writing, a single word:Come.

I blinked, trying to rub it away, but the drop was still stuck, proud, cheeky, wrong. Nemo saw it too. His grin widened. "Someone refills," he said, "and not me." Then he laughed again, and the boat hummed along, mockingly, sated, as if it knew more than it would ever tell.

And I swore to myself: The delirium wasn't over. It had only just begun.

The tyrant with the pipe

He came back like a hangover after an orgy: helmet crooked, boots heavy, the smell of rum still hanging around his shoulders like a cloak. But this time he had no glass in his hand, no bottle, no stem. Just a small, shiny, dirty metal pipe, crooked and worn, as if it had already torn hundreds of ears. Nemo grinned, put the thing to his lips, and blew.

The sound wasn't a sound—it was a damned blow to the skull. Shrill, razor-sharp, drilling directly into my brain, making my teeth vibrate as if they were made of glass. My stomach immediately cramped, my heart stumbled in my throat. Three-two-three? Forget it. Everything was just*whistle*Shrill, screaming.

Men screamed, some covered their ears, one vomited on the floor, and the smell of liquor and bile mingled with the stinking oil.

Ned jumped up, cursed, and held his ears. "Turn that off, you goddamn bastard!" His voice sounded like a whine next to that sound. The others? They twitched, they screamed, they nearly ripped their own ears off. One banged his head against the wall until blood flowed, just to drown out the screaming. Nemo continued to blow as if conducting an orchestra.

The panel on the wall flickered. Lights down, air +1/2, work steady—all in time with the whistle. Every click adjusted, as if the Nautilus itself were attuned to that command. It was as if the ship was laughing: "You thought rum was bad? Listen to this."

Conseil staggered, pressing his hands tightly over his ears, his glasses askew, blood running from his nose. "This is no coincidence!" he yelled. "This is frequency, damned torture frequency!" But his voice was drowned out, the sound swallowing every word.

I stood there, half-kneeling, my head about to burst, and I knew: The bastard didn't need fists, a bottle, or a gun. Just this whistle. A piece of metal that turned men into animals. Nemo grinned, blew again, shriller, harder, until we all lay on the ground.

And then he stopped. Silence. Only wheezing, sobbing, gnashing of teeth. The ship was still humming, deep, like a stomach after too much booze. Nemo put his pipe back in his pocket, looked at us, and grinned. A grin that said:*You belong to me. Completely.*

He didn't wait a minute. No pause, no breath for mercy. Nemo took the thing out again, put it to his mouth, and blew a second time—harder, longer, deeper into the flesh. The sound wasn't just in the ears; it went through the bones, vibrated in the teeth, and drilled into the spine like a rusty drill. My eyes flickered as if they were about to burst, and my heart stumbled in an uneven rhythm, as if it wanted to quit.

Men fell to their knees in rows. One vomited so hard it sounded like a gunshot, another howled like a skinned child. Blood trickled from noses, ears, and ruptured eardrums. Ned roared, fighting against the sound, but even his roar sounded pathetic, thin, pathetic next to the shrieking. "Shut up, Nemo! Shut up!" But Nemo grinned, kept blowing, like a conductor in hell.

The Nautilus joined in. The entire boat vibrated, walls trembled, pipes groaned. The panel flickered,Light up, air down, work up– all to the rhythm of that goddamn whistle. As if the ship itself were dancing to its tune. I swore, even the warm hole in the side of the ship was pounding to the same beat, brutally, mercilessly.

Conseil writhed, hands to his ears, blood dripping from his fingertips. "It's targeted! Frequencies! He's killing us with math!" He screamed, but his words were immediately torn apart by the sound. One of the men smashed his own ears to a pulp, only to be unable to hear anything. Another crawled across the floor like a worm, drooling, wheezing, and Nemo just kept blowing.

I felt like my skull was going to explode. Everything was vibrating, even my damn heart was pumping to the beat of the whistle. Three-two-three was dead. Now there was only whistling. A beat that wasn't human.

Then—stop. Nemo took the whistle away, slowly, almost tenderly. Silence struck us like a whip. Men fell, trembling, bleeding. Ned knelt, but he snarled, his gaze filled with hatred. Nemo grinned. And I knew: This wasn't a drunken game. This was control. Pure, naked, brutal obedience—with a single, accursed sound.

The bastard grinned as if he were finished—but he wasn't. He raised his whistle again, this time blowing shorter, harder, not like a knife, but like a whip.*Piiiiift.*A sound, shrill as chalk on tin, and suddenly they stood up. All of them. The men, who had just been lying on the ground, vomiting, drooling, half-blind, jerked their heads up, standing up like marionettes pulled by invisible strings.

I swore it wasn't willpower. It was reflex, a forced command. One was trembling, blood pouring from both ears, yet he stood at attention. Another, half-drunk, half-dead, staggered in line as if he were in the army. Nemo blew again—shorter, deeper—and the bastards marched. Step, step, step. Oil, blood, vomit under their boots, no matter. No matter.

Ned staggered, clutched his ears, and yelled, "I'm not a dog, you swine!" But the sound consumed him too, weakened his knees, nearly forcing him to the ground. He struggled, cursed, spat, but I saw it: he was about to march too. And Nemo? He grinned, raised his hand, and directed them like a mad bandmaster, as if he had the whole crew in time from hell.

The record played along obediently. Lights down, work up, air steady – every click like applause. Even the Nautilus vibrated to the new rhythm, no longer three-beat, but the pounding of boots, mechanical, brutal, merciless. The ship was now part of the parade, part of the command.

Conseil staggered beside me, bloody, trembling, but his eyes alert. "They're command frequencies," he growled, "every note a command. He's playing us like tools." He coughed up blood, spat it on the floor, and looked at Nemo like a devil finally showing his horns.

And Nemo kept blowing, grinning, and we all marched, whether we wanted to or not. Dogs with chains, led by a tyrant with a cursed whistle.

Ned tore himself away, with all the fury left in his damned body. Blood was running from his ear, the butt still hanging from his fist, and he roared so loudly you'd think he was trying to drown out the whistle. "I'M NOT A DOG! YOU FUCKING PIG!" His voice was rough, bloody, full of hate—but against the shrill whistle, it sounded like a whine.

Nemo just grinned, picked up his whistle again, and blew. Short, long, short. The sound blasted into the air, pierced skulls, and tore muscles. Ned sank to his knees, bit his tongue, blood spurted, but he didn't fall over. He pushed himself up, kept roaring, and banged the stem against the wall, sending sparks flying. "FUCK YOUR PIPE!"

Nemo blew again, this time a series of quick thrusts,*beep beep beep*Like nails hammered into bone. Ned writhed, hands to his ears, shaft clattering to the ground. But it didn't break. He growled, drooled, spat blood and phlegm, and screamed, "YOU WON'T GET ME, BASTARD!"

The other men collapsed almost in a row, like straw dolls in a storm. Some crawled, others crouched, one just howled. The Nautilus vibrated, the deck flashed. Lights up, work up, air down—the entire damned belly of the ship played to the beat of Nemo's infernal melody.

Conseil grabbed my arm and screamed into my barely functioning ear. "Don't you see?! He's breaking us with clay, not with fists! He's turning us into tools!" His voice was distant, distorted, but I understood. My ribs vibrated, my skull pounded, my heart staggered, but Ned still stood, growling, bloody, full of hatred.

And Nemo? He grinned. He enjoyed it. Every whistle was a blow, every whistle proof that he was the ruler. Ned was the only one still resisting. And he stood like a dog who would rather die than obey orders.

Conseil came back to himself like a knife being wiped clean. Blood on his ears, glasses crooked, but his eyes were calculating. He wiped away the red film with the back of his hand, spat, and grabbed me by the collar. "Listen, don't— "there." Then he pointed to Nemo's hand, which lay casually on the plate. "In short =Light. Long =Air. Series =WorkHe's not playing us. He's playingthe ship, and the ship playsus."

Nemo started, piiift. Conseil counted on his fingers like someone weighing lies: one, two, three, then cut. At that exact moment, the lamps snapped,Light −½. Second whistle, longer, stomach churning:Air −1. Serial shock—pip-pip-pip—, the plate snappedWork +2"Do you see it now?" he gasped. "Frequencies + switches. Command tone,coupled. We are merely the flesh that obeys the beat."

I nodded, even though everything in my head was bucking. The next whistle cut through my teeth, shattering them like ice. Conseil ripped a piece of gauze from my pocket, stuffed it into my ears, and wet it withrealAlcohol. "Broadband in the muck," he growled. "Dampens. Not much. Enough for the brain." He stuffed himself, bit down on the blade of the knife handle. "Bone conduction. Bite!"

Nemo blew again, short-long-short, the men jerked as if on wires. Conseil pointed to the pipes above us. "Hollow spaces."resonanceHe hits the lengths. The boat is the whistle, not the piece in his fist." He reached for a valve, released it abreathA dirty hiss filled the corridor—white noise, thin as an excuse. The next whistle came, struck, butsofterTwo men stopped choking, one raised his head. "Masking," he snarled. "Dirty, but it eats lace."

The bastard downstairs noticed. Nemo clamped his pipe differently between his teeth, whipping out a new blast, higher, sharper. My stomach cramped. Conseil rammed his elbow into my ribs.Push-pull!” He tapped with two fingers on thewarm holethe side of the ship—two blows, then the thirdsmallThree-two-three. My sternum answered. The next whistle hit—but the echo from the metal ranagainstI felt sick, but for the first time I stayedstand.

We stumbled down the corridor, Conseil hammered the pipe with his knuckles in rhythm, searching for nodes where the sound hurt the most. "Here," he hissed, knockingshort–short—long, turned the valve half a tooth. The whistle

from the front came, and the wall vibratedacrossas if she had decided not to obey today. Three guys behind us stopped crawling and lookedbeforethemselves, instead of in the foam of their own mouths.

Ned was still standing. Blood, shaft, anger. Conseil shoved gauze into his ears, the Irishman snarled, about to rip it out, when the next whistle thundered. Ned staggered—and stayed. "Bite!" Conseil cried, pressing the back of the knife between his teeth. Ned obeyed out of defiance, not out of insight, and suddenly his gaze was backevil, not empty. "One more time, you pig," he babbled in steel, "and I'll teach you to sing."

Nemo changed the pattern, pip—piiift—pip, and the record did its circus:Light up, air down, work upMen fell back into position. Conseil counted, his lips full of blood. "A-B-A. Base note, throttle, kick. Alwaysthe sameshitty grammar." He tore a crack in the steam further, made the noise grow richer, knocked on the warm hole—our boldCorrection stampin the belly of the boat. What was previously a pure dagger became a quarterKnife.

"Will we get him with this?" I asked, salivating. "No," he gasped, "but we'll getseconds." His hands were quick, his brain even quicker: gauze, alcohol, valve, push-pull. "Seconds arePowerif he only gives millimeters."

The whistle came again, so high that my eyes watered. And then the little miracle of dirt and math happened: TheGlass teethabove us a flickering spike—sawtooth— which did not lower, butrose. No flicker. Line climbing upwards like an impudent drop. Nemo blew louder. The line rosefurtherConseil laughed ugly. "See? We're pushing his toneout ofthe stomach. Short. Enough."

Behind us, someone who had just been a dog was wheezing. Now he was man enough to raise his head. Ned spat out the knife, grinning bloodily. "One more time, and I'll shove this whistle up his ass." The next whistle came, yes, it hurt, and yes, we still bent over. But webrokeNot all of them.

The impossible at the end was small and cheeky: On theplatejumpedWorka toothback, without fingers, without gloves. Ttk. In the same breath, the warm hole knockedthree—two—three, although Nemo was just screwing a different rhythm into our heads. For a heartbeat, the ship showed usouro'clock—and then fell silent again, good as always.

He drove us off like cattle. No words, no "please"—just metal against his lips and that slanting, sawing whistle that ripped through marrow and brain. "Forward," he said nothing, and yet we went. One after the other, boots in the

mixture of blood and oil, the corridors narrow, pipes hot, our breath bitter. The lamps above us flickered in time.Light −½, then briefly up, then down again—as if they were carrying his mood. The record did its courtly curtsy:Work +1,Air −½. Sweating as a command.

Ned kept his head down, gauze in his ears, the back of a knife between his teeth, a look like a dog that will bite if you put your hand too close. He was running, yes—buthisManner: shoulders broad, anger in the neck, ready to turn the entire fair over at the slightest mistake. Conseil held his elbow, counting in his jaw—our pathetic counter-beat: two clammy knocks on the pipe, the thirdsmall. Thewarm holein the side of the ship answered, almost gratefully. Three—two—three, crooked, butour.

The whistle came diagonally from behind, a series of pip—piiift—pip, a clean "March, eat, obey." Two men faced off, arms at the seams, faces empty like scraped shells. The third stumbled, buckled, clinging to a valve collar. Nemo blew shorter, deeper, and you could see the guy at the soundtwitchesas if someone were pulling his heart with wire. One beat too fast, one too late—shit2–3–2in flesh. He sank down, his eyes rolled back, his mouth open, a wheezing sound, then only that stupid, horrible space where life thinks about whether it still has the energy.

"Back!" no one yelled. We stood still, because the whistle blew. Conseil was already on him, knife blade between his teeth, hands hard. "Pulse," he growled, although he couldn't hear it; felt it in his wrist, cursed, yanked the guy onto his back, rammed his fists into his chest as if he were kicking down doors. "Breathe, you bastard." Boom. "Breathe." Boom. Nemo blew.short—short—long, and the record switchedAir +1,Light upbrute mercy, like a tip that insults.

The whistle continued, finer, more evil. I felt my teeth vibrating against my jaw; blood tasted like a battery. Ned stepped half an inch out of line and received a piiift like a slap in the face. He roared against the void, spitting steel and red, but stopped becausehateIt warms you up, but not deafens you. I, in turn, held on to the pipe, which still carried our counter-humming. "Hold the sound to your throat," Conseil hissed without air, and I saw what he meant: valveto breathe on, rustling—a poor rag over the circular saw. The next whistle cut, but it cut more dully.

The man flinched. Once, twice. Conseil released his jaw with two fingers, forcing air into it like someone stuffing a stubborn sack. "Don't go away!" The ship vibrated, the lamps stuttered, and then—an ugly, glorious cough. Gurgling, dirty, real. The man sucked in air as if it were a debt he could never repay.

Nemo lowered his pipe a finger's breadth, not much, just this intrusiveObjectivityin his movements:Work −1,Air remains,Lighton decency.

"Go on," he panted without a voice, started, blew. We set off like the most disgusting procession in the world: men who stink, drip, curse, and above all, the sound. I hated him. I almost loved him, because heworked. Order that pushes you with needles on your back. We pushed the aisles empty, one bulkhead, two bulkheads, condensation dripped like cold mockery. The ship's side answered us less often, but when it did, it was incorrectTact, as if she were secretly on our side.

Ned almost fell, caught himself, and propped up the revived man. "Stand down, you joke," he babbled in steel, "or the bastard will carry you to the depths forever." The guy nodded, stupidly, gratefully, both. Nemo whistled for a kick in the calf muscles, and he marched off. Two men back, someone gasped for air, and I don't know if it was from last night's poison or the sound, but his pupils were two black holes. "Don't look," I told myself, looked, and only remembered the whistle.

Conseil held the world together with ropes of mathematics. Valvesa touch, pipestwo strokes,third smallGauze in his ears, alcohol in a cloth, and his bloody index finger secretly wrote on the wall: Damping—gear 3—works. I could have kissed him if I hadn't been afraid of breaking a tooth on the clay.

He chased us down one last straight, the dictator. The Nautilus came to attention, that's what you hear when metal suddenly sucks in its belly. Whistle—whistle—pause. We stood like pieces on a board. Nemo raised his whistle once more, pointed at the board with his glove:full light. He blewlongThe lights rose, white, harsh, revealing; every cut, every scab, every lie on my face became an exhibit. I thought: If God has a sense of humor, this is exactly how he plays police.

The man with the slipped heart stood again. Ill, trembling, but he stood. Conseil supported him from behind, and Ned held him in front by the collar, roughly, caringly, like a kick. Nemo hadn't put the pipe away yet. He weighed it in his hand as if the thing were a crown. The room held its breath, not because it felt awe—because ittrainedwas.

Then the small, indecent miracle that marked the day happened: The pipe in Nemo’s fist gave a singlequiettik off—without blowing. On the plate jumpedWorkin the same breathone tooth back. Ttk. And on the pipe next to me appeared in the condensation3–2–3—did not run, did not drip,ascended—

as if someone had pulled the beat up from the floor with an invisible hand. Nemo saw it. His grin wrinkled a millimeter. Our breath returned. ForaHeartbeat, the corridor was ours. Then he blew again.

Then it was over – not because we had won, but because he stopped the sound. Just like that, in the middle of the movement. No fade-out, no slow end. A*whistle*Still, sharp as a cut, then silence. The silence hit us harder than any sound. Our heads throbbed, skulls full of splinters, bones vibrating. Some swayed, some toppled over, one simply lay still.

The corridors stank of blood, sweat, alcohol, and fear. Men crouched there like beaten dogs, ears bloody, eyes glassy. Ned stood, legs apart, stock in his fist, anger in his eyes. He spat red on the floor, grinning hatefully. "You can whistle all you want, bastard. I only hear my own heart." His voice was shaky, but it was there. Conseil held his arm, cursed, fumbled with gauze and bandages, muttering something about "eardrums in my ass" and "we're going to die."

Nemo put away his pipe, slowly, almost solemnly. He looked at the men lying half-dead on the ground and grinned broadly, full of rum, full of power. "You're mine," he said calmly, "as long as you're breathing. And when you're no longer breathing, then you're mine, too." No roaring, no posturing. Just the truth, so raw that no one objected.

The panel on the wall clicked as if applauding. Lights down, air steady, work +1. The old three-beat rhythm returned, clean, orderly. Three-two-three, like a metronome for our humiliation. The ship hummed, deep, languid, contented—as if it had just learned who it truly belonged to.

The warm hole in the side of the ship throbbed, two thuds, then a third, this time large, bold, unashamed. I swore it wasn't a reflex. It was a comment. An "I saw it." Maybe even a "Not forever." But no one was listening. Everyone was fed up with their own buzzing in their heads.

One of the boys, who had just been choking, raised his head, looked at Nemo, and muttered, "Thank you." No irony, just pure madness. Nemo laughed, that deep, suffocating laugh that scares you more than any threat.

I stood there, shaking, vomit in my throat, blood in my ear, and knew: We were no longer crew, no longer men. We were instruments. He had tuned us. With a fucking whistle.

And then the tiny, wrong thing happened, the one that blows your mind: A drop of water detached itself from the bulkhead. Instead of falling, it rose upwards and hung on the ceiling. Completely still, like a stupid period at the end of a sentence. Nemo saw it, too. And his grin only grew wider.

Men who pray while vomiting

They lay there like wrecks, half kneeling, half prone, one with his face in the bucket, the other with his hands clutched at his chest as if he wanted to rip his own heart out. Choking was the psalm, bile the litany. Every breath stank of rum, spirits, and blood. The corridors were sticky, the lamps above us flickered wearily in three-beat rhythm, but kept stumbling into the wrong 2-3-2, as if even the ship had a hangover.

Conseil ran from skull to skull, pulling heads up, holding them over the tin bucket, cursing in French, German, Latin, all mixed up. "Puke, but don't choke me!" He slammed cloths against mouths, soaking them with real alcohol, which burned like fire and reeked of a hospital. His hands trembled, but they functioned as if he had accepted the role of sexton in this hellish mass.

Ned laughed, held a drooling sailor's head, and pushed his forehead down. "Pray, you dog, pray! Maybe someone will hear you if you vomit enough." His voice was nasty, but his hands held the guy amazingly tightly, amazingly gently. He grinned, spat into the bucket, drank more, and repeated, "Amen." Except his amen sounded like an insult.

The men muttered something, some ancient prayers, others just meaningless words. "Holy Mary..." "Our Father..." "Shit, shit, shit." Every sentence sounded the same, muffled by gagging, interrupted by vomiting. The corridors echoed with it, as if we'd built a church out of rust and vomit.

The plate in front clicked.Light −½,Air +½,Work stable.Millimeters of grace, nothing more. A slider like a priestly blessing that only ensures that we stay alive a little longer, so that we can continue to pray, continue to vomit, continue to obey.

I held my own head over the bucket, vomiting bile, red wine, and rum, feeling my skull vibrate in the wrong rhythm. Three-two-three? No. Two-three-two. The wrong beat nailed itself into my ribs. I thought: This isn't a prayer, this is a fucking conspiracy between my stomach and God.

And then I saw it: a drop of rum climbing over the edge of the bucket. Not running down, not dripping. It crawledupwards, slowly, proudly, stuck to the metal like a new host in this accursed mass.

The buckets lined up like tin altars. Everyone got their due: a cup, a cloth, and if they were lucky, a spot by the bucket to vent their bile. Conseil ran among them like a drunken sexton, yanking up skulls, pushing them down, giving a little water when someone couldn't breathe. "Faster, you wanker, spit it out!" he growled, his hands working like machines.

Ned grinned broadly, his face still covered in blood and rum. "Amen, you assholes!" he yelled, and the men groaned, vomited, and prayed. Two actually muttered real psalms, their words brittle, drenched in choking. "Holy Mary..." – then another load came up, splashing into the bucket. One tapped with trembling fingers.3–2–3on the edge of the bucket, over and over again, as if it were his own amen. No one laughed anymore.

The glass teeth above us flickered, the record clicked:Air +½,Light down,Work −1.No mercy, just rules. As if Nemo himself had decided how much vomit a man had left before he died.

And then I saw the first bundles of fibers. Thin knots on cups, on railing wire. Open = Please. Half = Still. Closed = Out. Men with too much blood in their mouths to speak, but still making signs. They held their "rosaries" in their fingers as if they were counting, praying, hoping. Ned laughed at it, spat on a bundle of fibers, and said, "If your God wants to save you, he can blow his own whistle." Nevertheless, he kept his hand on the back of the next man, who was choking.

I swore, for a moment the condensation on the bulkhead wrote two letters again:N/AMirror-inverted, crooked, blurry. One person saw it and murmured, "Amen." Another, "Nemo." And I thought: Maybe both.

And the bucket? It filled up, smelling like a mixture of death and communion. Every blow, every thrust, every choking was a prayer that ended directly in the bucket.

He came as he always comes—without haste, but in such a way that every breath in the room registered his presence. Nemo stood between the buckets, helmet tilted, hands behind his back, and looked down the line like a priest checking whether his worshippers were kneeling low enough. One was

wheezing, one was praying, one was vomiting, and all were the same. He grinned. Then he raised his pipe.

A short whistle –*piiiift.*No terror like before, just a cut through the skull, enough to make every head jerk. The plate clicked along. Light -½. A second whistle, long and harsh, like a knife through an eardrum. Air +½. Men raised their arms, not out of faith, but because their lungs received the command. Nemo nodded as if he'd heard "Amen."

Conseil cursed, holding someone's head as it nearly fell into the void. "This isn't mass, this is torture!" he yelled, but his hands still worked like a sexton distributing communion wafers. He soaked gauze with alcohol, shoved it into mouths to dull the taste of poison, and at the same time muttered, "Breathe, damn it, breathe." His voice was the only real comfort in this theater.

Ned laughed, blood in his beard, rum in his eyes. "There, see it? The man's whistling, and you're doing knee bends! Keep praying, you dogs!" He himself squatted there, kneeling over the bucket, spitting red and bile, then muttered, "Damn God, if you want something, get it yourself." Nemo heard it, grinned wider, and raised his whistle again.

A third whistle—a series of short-short-long. Work—1. Break from the machine. A sacrament dirtier than any host. Men slumped, not out of grace, but because Nemo gave them a moment to continue vomiting, to continue praying.

I swear, the whistle cracked once on its own without Nemo blowing. A little*tik*, metallic, sharp. And the record jumped along with it.*Ttk.*Without fingers, without hands. Like an echo that said: God, too, is laughing in this ship.

And the room, filled with choking, stench, and prayers, nodded silently. A black mass, led by a drunken tyrant with a pipe.

Conseil was no longer a medic; he was a reluctant sexton. He knelt beside every man who vomited, held their skulls, stuffed gauze into their mouths, and soaked them with real alcohol. "Better burn here than in the stomach," he growled, while the men choked, prayed, and wheezed. He had pockets full of pieces of fiber, tying them to fingers, to cups, and into the cracks in the railing. Open knot: Please. Half-knotted: Still. Closed: Out. Rosaries made of rope that stank of salt, vomit, and rum.

His eyes, red and glassy, still calculated. He counted breaths, cursed the lapses, shoved men into position so they wouldn't choke on their own vomit. "Long, long, short," he murmured, as if they were prayers. And somehow they were: breathing rhythms he prescribed to delay dying. Ned laughed at it, grinned, but still placed his hand on the ribs of a half-dead bastard, pressed, counting in the same rhythm.

The lamps above us cast streaks into the darkness, flickering like church windows, made entirely of dirt and electricity. The ship vibrated, the warm hole pounding, three-two-three, but duller, deeper, as if it wanted to join in the prayer itself. And the record clicked again, sharp and cold:Air +1,Light down,Work stable.Nemo grinned at everyone, his whistle in hand, but he didn't blow. He didn't need to. The men were already on their knees, long since in his mess.

I looked into a glass of spirits Conseil had used to rinse. A flake, sooty and brownish, floated in it. It didn't sink. It didn't rise either. It simply remained sideways, as if nailed to nothing. I stared until my eyes watered. Impossible. And yet there it was, a small, dirty halo amidst the muck.

Conseil wiped the sweat with bloody hands and muttered, "Pray or die. It makes no difference." Ned spat into the glass, grinned, and the men continued praying, vomiting, choking, out of rhythm.

Ned started off by raising his voice, as always. "If heaven wants something, let it come down and say so!" He slammed the cup onto the railing, spat into the bucket of water, and grinned like a criminal on two legs. But the guy in front of him toppled forward, his eyes white, his larynx closed, and his throat was filled with that ugly wheezing sound, as if someone were ramming a shoe down his throat. Ned sighed, said, "Shit," and knelt. Hands to his ribs, thumbs under his sternum, pressing in time, not sweet, just right. "One—two—three. Breathe, you jackass. One—two—three." He counted like he was beating a prayer into someone's body.

Conseil was there, gauze on the man's lips, a drop of real alcohol burning like a small mercy. "Long, long, short," he murmured, and Ned adjusted his hands, not out of faith, but simply because the body obeys mathematics. The man spat out a brownish puff, then came air, jerky, dirty, but air. Ned nodded, cursed the sky, which didn't appear, and continued counting.

The glass teeth above us flickered, tired as the eyes of old dogs. The record made its sarcastic blessing:Air +½,Light −½,Work −1. Order that pretends to be

mercy. A few rows away, someone was actually murmuring half a rosary, with fibers around his fingers: open bunch—please, half—still, closed—out. His hands trembled, but they knew the alphabet of cracks and wires better than any book.

"You and your God," Ned growled, not looking up. "When he comes, he'll bring a shovel." The man beneath his hands drew a long, ugly breath. Conseil tucked his head to one side so he wouldn't eat his own soup and nodded to Ned, that curt nod that says: keep going, just like that, no heroics, just work. Ned kept going. His palms turned red, his jaw hardened. "One—two—three. One—two—three."

Nemo stood slanting in the shadows, his pipe unused, the corners of his mouth raised in a cold smile. He didn't look like mercy. He looked like inventory. A quick finger on the plate—Air remains,Lightdown a bit—so that the men would kneel, whether they wanted to or not. Not a word from him. He let the room pray and their stomachs speak.

The chorus sounded like dirt: choking, howling, panting. I took the bucket for another one, one that no longer had a name, just a trembling. And I noticed how the bulkheads felt: damp, salty, as if they had been listening. The condensation formed a thin arc on the metal, wantingN/Awrite, failed, flowed back into an anonymous blob. Perhaps that was the whole theology here: start, erase, continue.

"Breathe," said Ned, more quietly this time. He rested his forehead briefly against the man's shoulder, not nicely, just close, and his hand continued to keep the beat, stubbornly,3–2–3I felt it in my own sternum, like a hammer that had become polite. Conseil counted along, lips dry, eyes wet. The man took a breath, then another, a bigger one, as if he had understood something that needed no words.

And then it happened, small and impudent: Thewarm holein the side of the ship knocked back—three blows, the thirdsmall—exactly in Ned's hand. Not loud, not heroic. Simply in sync, like a secret amen that no one asked for. Ned blinked, cursed, and kept counting.

One collapsed mid-amen. No drama—a blunt forward tilt, chin on metal, tongue heavy as a tool. His hands fluttered, searching for purchase, found only the edge of the bucket, and slid down it, slimy. Conseil was there immediately, yanked the skull up, twisted it sideways, growled a filthy "Confession later" as

he cleared his throat. The man wheezed, spat brown poison, then nothing more. Only silence, reeking of the ship's doctor and the cemetery.

The record made its cold blessing:Air +1,Light up,Workleft her standing—like a host of oxygen and scorn. Lamps became bright enough that every pore was filled with shame. Men blinked, covered their eyes, knelt lower, because "grace" here takes the form of brightness that reveals you, not saves you.

"Breathe, you bastard," Conseil snarled, placing his fist on his sternum and hammering rhythm into flesh. "Long—long—short." Ned held his head, roughly yet carefully at the same time, the cup resting between his boots, reeking of all sins. "Confess to the bucket," he muttered, "it'll keep you dry." And then they came, the half-mad confessions from rotten throats: "I tied the knot—wrong—..." "The fiber—backwards—was intentional..." "He refilled it... not the officer..." Words tumbled out like vomit, without a goal, without absolution.

Conseil grabbed a bottle from the row and held it up against the harsh light. Clean label, clean neck, but theFederal GovernmentThe collar was knotted backward, roughly, by fingers that knew what they were doing. No accident. A mirror of lies. "Sabotage," he growled, blood on his lip, "or your god has a sense of humor." Ned spat red and looked at Nemo. He stood there with a pipe in his fist, grinning as if it were none of his business. One glove just tapped the pulpit:Air remains,Lightanother edge on top so that every debt shines with sharp edges.

The man who had smoked started wheezing again, trembling, taking a breath as if he had to pay for it. "Good," said Conseil, "one more time." His hands worked, his mouth cursed, his gaze searched for the source of the poison and found everywhere only men who would rather pray than turn around. Two meters away, one was holding out for an emergency notch.Brasshigh—wrong-notched, mirror-inverted—as if it were now an icon. "He swapped it," he whispered. "After the whistle." No one asked "who."

The glass teeth above hummed brightly, then back, as if they had briefly tasted the Hallelujah and choked on it.warm holeA double knock pounded in the side of the ship, then a third, smaller, more polite—our pathetic amen. Ned counted in his sternum, holding the man's skull as if it were a bowlful of cheap salvation. "One more," he growled, "one more. Long—long—short."

Conseil tore hisiodinefrom his pocket, the small bottle containing the hospital soul. He turned the lidnotoff; he only needed to see if the world still obeyed. "If you're going to pray," he told the unconscious man, "then pray to something

that burns and helps." He held the closed glass at an angle, as if trying to persuade the contents. Inside, a single golden-brown droplet broke away, detached itself from the belly of the flask, spun, roseupwardslike a blatant sin—and stuck to the top. Silent. Period after a word no one said.

In the end, everything reeked of sour shame and cheap consolation. The buckets were emptied, rinsed, and put back up like altars that no one had blessed. Men stood unsteadily, wiping the gray soup with gray rags, as if guilt could be spread like oil until it became invisible. One whispered "Amen," another "Screw it," and both meant the same thing. The gears breathed heavily, the glass teeth above did their weary three-beat cadence, stumbled briefly, recovered, and the whole metal acted as if it had patience with us.

Conseil distributed cloths like hosts, placed fiber in hands, knottedopen,half,to—no religion, just an alphabet for the half-dead. He tied two short strands over a lattice, a cross of rope, rough as a curse. "So you can find your way back," he murmured to someone who was already toppling forward again. His fingers trembled, but they wrote order into the chaos, stubbornly, mechanically, without hope. "Long—long—short," he whispered to the body, "and then again." The warm hole in the side of the ship answered, softly, three taps, the third lowercase—our little yes, which no one signs.

Ned stood with the bucket in his hand, like a sexton who hates the whole theater. "If anyone has to pray again, do it quietly," he growled, "I've heard enough holy music." He lifted a skull, washed it off, roughly but not incorrectly, and sat the fellow back down, back to steel so he wouldn't fall back into nothingness. "Breathe," he said, and the ribs did. His gaze remained on the wall, where Kondens likes to write stories; his mouth remained silent, but his hand counted in bone-like rhythm:3–2–3.

He there—helmet, pipe, king without a crown—stepped forward like a choirmaster announcing the end of the day. Nemo didn't put the pipe in his mouth, he just clicked it in his glove. A short tic, as if he were testing the organ stop. His other glove went to the record, not hastily, just so confidently that it hurt.Lightgot some decency, raised himself two notches and held.Airremained narrow and expensive.Workfell by a tooth—rest as grace in installments. "For later," said his silence; the lamps understood "full light“, whether tonight or tomorrow or whenever he wants to show us up again.

The men laid fiber across the grates to form small crosses that were more landmarks than prayers. Someone inserted a brass pin with a false notch into a clamp, as if saints were now hanging upside down. Someone else took a

phantom drag from an empty pipe he'd never owned. Conseil cut himself on the wire, cursed, sucked away the blood, and wrote a period under his invisible log with his thumb. Ned grinned crookedly, not looking at Nemo, yet seeing him; his chin did the work, his back the defiance.

On the bulkhead was this word again, half, crooked, mirrored:N/ALonger than before, thicker in the condensation, as if it wanted to stay this time. Right next to it hung a smallFederal Government, inserted backward, defiant as a middle finger. No one said "cry for help." No one said "betrayal." Everyone saw it. Everyone looked away. That was the liturgy: see, remain silent, keep counting.

Nemo slowly stroked the glove across the surface, as if stroking a cat's fur against the grain. Not a command, just possession. "Enough," said his shoulder. The lights turned up a shade to make our tiredness hurt. One of the guys wanted to say thank you, but instead choked, nodded, and held the bucket tighter. The ship hummed deeply and contentedly, like a belly that's decided to keep digesting, no matter what you throw at it.

I briefly rested my forehead against the cold metal. It was truly there: the pounding, the throbbing, the faint laughter the hull sometimes makes when we're dumber than steel. Behind me, Ned scratched with his fingernail.3–2–3into a varnished edge, an ugly prayer that lasts longer than voices. Conseil tied the last fiber wreath, slipped it into the fist of someone who couldn't hold it, and pretended that was enough.

Then the silent trick happened that no god signs, but the boat does: The three sliders on the plate—Air,Light,Work—posedflush. No glove on, no shadow. A single TTK, as clean as a cold joke. The men looked up, no one said anything. I swore the hull held its breath.

From the depths came a single tok, not loud, not threatening—cold. Like an amen that no one prays, but which still counts.

The deep sea as an ashtray

The corridor stank of burnt oil, cold sweat, and the cheap tobacco the guys had stolen from a box somewhere. Everyone was puffing on a butt, no one had lips for it, but they all held on tight as if they were crowns. Their skin was sooty, their eyes tired, their throats full of acid. Behind us, shovels rattled, metal on

metal, the sound of men who no longer knew whether they were hauling coal or corpses.

The first dead man was already lying there, wrapped in a filthy sheet, more like a parcel than a person. Not a prayer, not a word. One spat on the floor, one grinned crookedly, one cursed: "Shitty job." There was no more grief to be had. We grabbed the bastard, not carefully, not roughly—simply as if he were a piece of furniture that now had to make its way downstairs.

The record clicked as if it knew.Light −½,Work +1,Air +½.Everything was in rhythm, as if cremation were just another shift at work. Men coughed, flames devoured, the room glowed orange, shadows like scars on the walls. Nemo stood in the back, pipe in the corner of his mouth, smoke from his nose, as if he himself had decided that the dead man was nothing more than a butt after too many puffs.

Ned cursed, joined in the attack, held the head a moment longer before pushing it into the mouth of the ember. Not gently, not tenderly, just that brief "no" in his shoulders. Conseil took silent, invisible notes, muttering a number as if he were entering the guy into a log.

We pushed, the heat biting, the stench a mixture of flesh, varnish, and hell. Someone laughed, too thin, too off-key. Another sang two words from a psalm, choked, and fell silent again. The stove roared, as if to thank us.

And then it happened: A flake of ash broke away, gray, as light as a feather. It didn't fall. It rose. Slowly, stubbornly, like a smoke ghost. It clung to the ceiling, black on gray, as if it wanted to tell us all: even ash has more pride than we do.

The flames blazed like tongues of iron, and we fed them, one by one. Not just bodies, but sacks full of slag, boards that had long since rotted, crates of waste that no one cared to count anymore. Everything flew into the Nautilus's mouth, as if it were hungry for garbage. Every thrust of the shovel was a curse, a cough, a half-joke.

Conseil muttered numbers. "One. Two. Three." His voice wasn't a prayer, but a register. Each dead man was given a number, not a dignity. He drew lines in the soot glass with his finger, as if they were labels some god would later read. His hands trembled, but they wrote, as if order depended on the twitching of his fingers.

Ned stood by, smoking, spitting, cursing. "Ashes, all ashes," he growled, and then stopped for a moment. With each skull he pushed, he paused for a breath, looked, cursed, shook his head—and only then did he strike. No hero, no priest, just someone who couldn't quite blur the distinction between filth and humanity.

Nemo puffed on his pipe, smoke like cynicism on his face. He said nothing, needed nothing. A quick glove on the record:Air +½,Work +1,Light down.Millimeters, nothing more. He led us like pokers, not like men.

The air burned their throats, their eyes watered. One man mumbled the remainder of a Lord's Prayer, broke off, choked, and vomited into the firepile. Another laughed so hoarsely he coughed his lungs out. "Amen," he rasped afterward, spat out blood, and continued shoveling.

I looked into the spirit glass Conseil had placed on the floor to rinse his fingers. A flake of soot floated in it, brownish, angular. It didn't sink. It didn't rise either. It remained horizontal, in the middle of the glass, motionless. Like a frozen no, refusing to become part of the game.

And the furnace laughed, continued to devour, taking everything we gave it. We were the altar boys of a black mass, and the ashes were our damned gospel.

The hatch to the sea creaked as if its hinges themselves had a hangover. Two men turned the crank, iron squeaked, and then the mouth gaped open. A gray mushroom of soot, cinders, and burnt flesh pushed out, staggered for a moment in the water, and was immediately swallowed by the black. No resistance, no echo—just the deep sea, devouring everything as if it had never been there.

We stood there like idiots, staring into the hole as if we could see anything but blackness. Ned spat into the stream of ash, grinning crookedly. "Well, at least it won't smell any worse outside." Conseil counted, his fingers clinging to the soot, drawing lines in the air as if he himself were taking inventory of nothingness. Nemo puffed on his pipe, blowing smoke into the men's faces as if it were incense.

The current made a game of it. The soot swirled, swirled, forming lines that looked like writing. For a few seconds, I saw it clearly: three symbols, then two, then three again.3–2–3.As if the sea itself were rewriting the rhythm we've

carried in our bones for so long. Then it disintegrated, frayed, was eaten away, and disappeared.

The record clicked, as obedient as an altar boy.Work −1,Air stable,Light up.Control, nothing else. Nemo nodded as if it were a prayer he'd written himself. The men coughed, spat, one laughed briefly, then immediately fell silent, because no one wanted to attract the shadow any further.

And there it was: a small piece of soot that wouldn't drift away. It clung to the glass, slowly pushing its way upwards, as if it wanted to get out of the sea and into us. For a moment, I thought it was writing again.3–2–3– this time on the inside. I blinked, and it crumbled. But the pane suddenly smelled of ash, as if it had inhaled the breath of a dead person.

He stood at the edge like an undertaker without a hat, pipe in the corner of his mouth, and tapped the butt against steel,*tik*as if this were a bell. "All ash," he said without a voice. No lecture, no pathos. Just bookkeeping on his face. The man calculated in soot and minutes, not in people. He pointed with his glove at the hatch, which was still steaming, and in the crew's faces, I saw how disgust became routine.

Ned growled deeply, rolling the end of his cigarette between his teeth. "Not all of it," he grumbled, and spat out a spark that danced in the draft, smelling like a joke that came too late. He held the butt as if it were evidence. "Not all of it." He pointed with his chin at the waistband in the cloth, where a head had just been lying. "That one..." He got no further. The ship coughed heat into the hatch, and the sentence died in the flames.

Nemo puffed on his pipe, letting the smoke flow over our heads as if blessing us with nothing. His glove brushed the plate, ever so lightly. Lights down, work +1, air +1/2. Burning as the order of the day. I felt the millimeter in my bronchi: a touch more oxygen, but only so the fire can eat cleanly. Order that smells like a slaughterhouse.

"All ashes," he repeated. No echo, only the clink of pokers and the coughs of those not yet finished being human. Ned lifted the stub, looked at Nemo, looked at us, looked into the hatch. "I'm not throwing it," he said, silence in his throat, "not if you say it belongs there." He held it for another breath, as one weighs a truth that sounds too cheap—and then threw it. It flew short, small, ridiculous, but every glance clung to it as if it had weight.

The deep sea took him, of course. It always does. But first, the warm hole in the side knocked, not politely this time. Three—two—three, and the third blow came, large, bold, without apology—like a no made of iron. It went through my sternum, through my boots, into the bottom, and I didn't know if it was the ship or the depths that objected.

Conseil did what he always does when the world becomes too simple: He looked for details. He counted sacks, looked at bundles of fiber, sucked the word "ash" into his tongue and teeth until it tasted of metal. "Book," he murmured, and his fingers wrote invisibly on the soot:*Man – not trash*. I would have laughed at him if I hadn't been so damn glad that someone here still wanted to save words.

Nemo tapped again. The table nodded. Work -½, air stays, light one notch lower. That's how much dignity you get here: shadow. One of the boys cleared his throat with an amen disguised as a cough. Another dropped the poker, picked it up again, and acted like he was just tired, not tired of it. Ned stared into the hatch, his tongue clicking against his teeth, and I knew he would have liked a god he could punch in the face.

"The sea eats," Nemo finally said, and a ribbon of ash leaped from the embers, merging into the blackness as if an old scar were tearing open. "I feed." Not threatening, not proud. Accounting. A sentence that leaves no room for stupid romanticism. I felt cold in the heat. I thought of the men we had just mentioned by numbers and wondered how long a name survives in the belly of ships.

Ned gave a short, ugly laugh and grabbed the next sack. "Then eat me," he muttered into the fire, "but don't count me." He pushed, and in the corner of his eye, I saw his no again in his shoulders. Short, stubborn, wasteful. Conseil nodded at him a number that sounded like defiance. Nemo acted as if he were only counting notches in a day.

And then the world proved once again that it enjoys small, cheeky miracles. Out there, where water is called black, the stub Ned had thrown hung silently in the stream for a breath. A glimmer, delicate, false, underwater. Not long. A defiant flicker, just enough for us all to see what we didn't want to see: that even garbage can endure a moment of soul. Then the embers cooled, the stub died, the depths closed their mouths, and the hatch breathed hotly again.

Between the sacks lay stuff that didn't look like corpses, and certainly not like slag. Boxes, small, clean, much too clean for this filth. At each neck, aFiber

bundle, but drawn in backwards, roughly, on purpose. Ned poked one; it sounded not like wood, but like tin, hollow like an excuse. "Since when do we burncans"?" he growled. No one laughed.

Conseil knelt, rubbed soot between his fingers and thumb, sniffed it, and grimaced. "Varnish. Solvent. No rum, no oil. ThisheardNot in an oven, that belongs in a damn inventory." He pulled the box open with the blade, just a finger's width of the lid—enough for the stench to hit us in the brain: sweet, acrid, dirty, expensive. The edge gleamed as if someone had polished numbers on it the night before.

"Closed." Nemo stood there as always, a statue with smoke in his mouth. He didn't need the word; the glove did the trick. The plate twitched.Light up,Worka touch high,Airremained brief—and between the clicks, audible like a mockery: a short2–3–2. Wrong time, dirty, as if someone had turned the metronome. He saw it. He said nothing.

Ned grabbed the collar at the neck of the next box, turned it, and held it up so that everyone could see the wrong direction. "This is not a mistake, this is agreeting." He threw the rope to the floor, stepped on it as if blood could be stamped out of signs. "Who threw it in there...?" He stopped because the stove coughed like an animal. The hatch sucked in air, and we automatically held our lungs—training that grows under the skin.

Conseil pulled out the blade and closed the lid again. "If you burn this, you'll get poison from the boat in your stomach," he said, quietly and matter-of-factly. Ned nodded briefly, the kind of nod that makes you think something's about to fall. I was already holding the poker tighter, in case "something" was us.

Nemo took two steps forward, the boot madetikon metal. No lecture. Just a hand on the plate, thumb so gently it hurt.Work −1,Light down,Air +½The flames became cleaner, hungrier. "Dispose of," his shoulder said. The boat growled in agreement. I could have sworn thatwarm holein the side of the ship responded with two blows and then one that didn’t fit into the sentence at all—asmall“no,” which was immediately swallowed in the heat.

We pushed the first slag bag along—and right behind it, one of the crates. It made a clinking noise that sounded like money or an accident, I don't know. Ned cursed, Conseil bit his lip, blood mingling with the soot, a jagged red against black. "Screw it," Ned said then, "if we're going to feed the deep sea, at least she'll know who did it." He kicked the crate harder than necessary, and I heard something sliding inside, metallic, poisonous.

The plate twitchedagain. A tiny2–3–2, barely more than a twitch, then immediately3–2–3, as good as a learned lie. Nemo raised his chin briefly, as if nodding to an invisible bookkeeper who had just highlighted a line in bold. No one asked a question. In corridors like these, questions are just new boxes.

Conseil reached for his spirit glass, that ugly little liturgy for clean fingers. He rinsed the blade; the soot slithered through the clear stuff like a lazy snake. I stared, because I always stare when the world pretends to be honest. The flake stopped, spun, and drew a trail in the alcohol, thin, brownish—two marks, just two,NandAHe didn't stay. He wipednotaway. He climbed. The brownish trailupwardsup the glass wall as if ink were suddenly lighter than nothing, and hung there like a grinning bug.

"Depth." He didn't say it, his glove said it. The record answered like a trained dog:full light,Work +2,Air −½The lights tore open the eyelids, white, hard, merciless; the torso groaned as if someone were pulling it down by its belt. The floor vibrated, thewarm holefirst hammered well3–2–3, then it slipped briefly into the shitty2–3–2as if the depth itself had hiccups.

Outside, in the cone of light, something unclean happened: the soot fellup. No magic, just a current, but so wrong that my brain stumbled. Black flakes rose like dirty snow, swirled, carried like loose thoughts, and disappeared into the bright cone that pointed downwards yet still pulled things up. "Nice physics," Ned growled, clamping the stub tighter in the corner of his mouth and breathing faster because the air was getting scarcer, and that's what men do when you turn the world off.

Inside, it began to snow—fine, gray, from the exhaust shaft. A faint burning smell that settled on the tongue like a confession. The men coughed in unison, no one shouted, no one prayed. Conseil tore a valve.by a touchup, just enough to sound like a bursting curse. "Push-pull," he hissed, and the thin stream of noise settled over the lamp whip like a dirty bandage. The next blow from the hull hit me more bluntly. Not nice, justfewer.

Nemo stood with his legs wide apart, pipe in his mouth, eyes dry as dust. His gloved hand stroked the record as if it were a cat being taught who it belonged to.Workhe held up as if he were hungry for shifting gears;AirHe let it go for a bit so we could get a decent sweat going. "Keep going," his shoulder said, and the stove obeyed, even though it was already singing like an animal that'd been punched in the face.

The cone of light outside created a stage, and the soot danced on it like cheap extras. Inside, gray powder clung to eyelashes, teeth, and the rum on one's breath. Ned stepped aside, where Conseil played the counter-beat—two fingers on the pipe,short—short—long– and pulled out the butt. "I'll continue blowing later," he growled, ripping the butt out of another man's mouth. "Lungs are mine." The guy hissed, taking a breath, not knowing who he owed it to.

I felt my head become light, not pleasantly, just hollow. The pounding in my stomach started again.3–2–3, tired, but ours. The record clicked once, then again, small as pinpricks:Lightremained high,Workanother tooth,Airdown again half a dozen times. Nemo liked it when we kneel without stopping toiling. Conseil raised his eyebrow, turned his valvea nothingcontinued. "Enough for brains," he muttered. "Not for pride."

A man stumbled, placed his hand on the hatch, leaving gray fingerprints that looked like bad signatures. "Stop," Ned growled, pushing him forward, and the depths responded with a long, cold pull that sank my teeth into my jaw. Outside, the soot continued to rise, as if flakes could float if only enough light hated them. Inside, a fine sliver of ash fell beneath the lamp and suddenly stopped. Not falling, not rising—standing, in the middle, as if the air were thick as gel.

I stared, because you always stare at things like this. The dust under the lampshade formed a line, clean, bold—sawtoothOne point, another, another. And the line did what no dirt should do: It wanderedupwards. Very slowly, like a smile that knows it's forbidden. Ned saw it too, spat his "Holy shit" against the floor. Conseil blinked once, as if he'd been expecting it. Nemo didn't smile. He tapped the plate, ttk, and the line crumbled into honest dust.

A joint at 5,000 meters

Five thousand. The pressure gauge stood there like a judgment, and every breath sounded as if it were passing through tin coins. The air was thin, metallic, tongues heavy like leaden rags. The glass teeth above us shimmered obediently in the3–2–3, but the room had that quiet pressure on the back of my neck that says: One more mistake and you'll be screwed down.

Then one of them—I swear his hands were still sooty from the oven—pulled a crooked thing out of his breast pocket. Greens, badly rolled, crooked like his

smile. "For the heights," he slurred, as ifdepthjust another word for longing. Ned grinned, that dog, and patted him on the shoulder. "Give it here. If we're going to drown, let's do it with taste." Conseil mumbled something about oxygen and brains and dying, which reeked of statistics, but no one listened until it was too late.

A match scratched. A ban madeclickThe small flame flickered, dissipated in the draft, bit into the paper cone, and suddenly the corridor smelled not just of iodine and soot, but of a garden none of us had ever known. First puff – coughs like gunshots into tin. Second – laughter, too thin. Third – that deep, idiotic sigh that flips the switch in men's heads.

The record immediately twitched, offended like a strict priest.Light −½,Air −½,Work stable.A warning stab with the ruler: Children, fire in the belly is a sin. The glass teeth narrowed like eyes that no longer want to forgive anything. The warm hole in the side of the ship throbbed against the ribs, not angrily, just awake.

Ned took the rod, pulled, blew, watched the smoke cling to the pipes. The vapor crept over the brass, tickled the valve heads, created little swirls where none should have been. "There's a draft," hissed Conseil, suddenly awake, his hand on the stem of a valve, his eyes on the gray thread. "Something's wrong here." Ned laughed. "Finally, something's talking to us that doesn't whistle." He passed it on, as generous as a king without a country. Two took, one cursed, one made a cross that looked more like a bundle of fibers.

I took a drag, too. Bitter, grassy, crooked. My lungs protested, my brain nodded, my knees went weak. The depth sat on my tongue, heavy and indifferent. The glass teeth flickered briefly into the2–3–2, recovered as if someone had slapped them. The record clicked meekly.Airremained close.Workremained defiant.

And then the first little, false spell happened: A curl of smoke detached itself from Ned's mouth, round and cheeky. It didn't fall up, it didn't sink down. It pushedsidewaysAs if it had hit an invisible wall, it hung there like a label in the void—a perfect circle that didn't know who to obey. I stared, blinked, coughed. The circle remained. For a moment, even the depths respected a whim of dirt and breath.

The flame made a hungry crackling noise that had no place in a belly like this. Everyone knew it, but no one listened. The small fire devoured paper, kissed grass, and the smoke came in puffs, gray and thick, settling on tongues and

guilt. We stood closer together, as if afraid the depths might be watching. Ned held the thing, pulled, blew, grinned, and passed it on, as magnanimous as a king with a single loaf of bread. Two men crossed themselves backward, one cursed, one laughed in a voice that immediately faded away.

The mist swept over the pipes like a cat rubbing itself against rails. Conseil followed it with his eyes, suddenly alert, as if someone had pressed a knife into his math. "Do you see that?" He pointed to a thin vortex that caught on a valve, trembled, disappeared, and reappeared. "Draft. Here. Where there shouldn't be any." He put his hand to the nut, turned it.by a touchback. The thread of smoke swayed, pulled to the side, climbedsidewaysalong the wall as if he were looking for a door that doesn't exist.

The record hissed its objection:Air −½,Light −½,Work stableBrave warning choir. The glass teeth narrowed, made that sharp white that says: one more joke, and you're on your knees. Thatwarm holeThere was a double thump in the side of the ship, followed by a third that sounded like a sigh that was too short. Three, two, three, only just. Deep breathing with frayed nerves.

“Yet,” said Ned, and everyone knew he meanteverythingwith it. He pressed the glow into the hand of a sailor who had too much blood on his lip. The sailor puffed, coughed, and grinned, as if he finally had a reason not to talk. Smoke slid under a slat, flaking out like gray fish. Conseil stepped closer to the pipe he didn't like and tapped it with his finger.short—short—longAgainst it. Push-pull in brass. The fog took it as a hint and turned off as if it had manners.

My throat burned, my head felt light, my legs felt like swaying; the depths lay on me like a second jacket. I watched the rings from our mouths die according to the same law: one tall and brave, two thin and timid, then nothing but dirty flags. The hallway now smelled of a garden none of us knew, and of a hospital no one wanted to pay for anymore.

"Slow down," Conseil growled, not to Ned, not to me—to the room. His fingers went to a second valve, turneda touch ofA thin murmur settled over the scene, swallowing the sharpest peaks of air and light. I felt my heart2–3–2-misstep and then, almost guiltily, back into3–2–3fell.

Someone was trying to make a joke. It didn't come out. Instead, ash fell onto a pile of fiber scraps, glowed, died, and left a brown stain that smelled of future trouble. Ned stamped it out without looking. "I don't want to burn until it whistles," he said, and no one laughed.

Then the world did its dirty little trick. A spark leaped from the top of the cone, the kind of tiny red creature that usually seeks the ground. It fell—and stayedin mid-airStanding. No draft, no hand, just air that was suddenly thick as gel. The spark glowed, small, defiant, as if it were forming an opinion. For a heartbeat, it hung there between us and the darkness, and then, without reason, it went out. No trace, no thread of smoke. Nothing. Only the depths, pretending to have smiled.

The smoke made us more honest than any prayer. No grand words, just gray threads that showed where the belly of the boat breathed and where it lied. Conseil stood there with the eyes of a watchmaker, one finger on his nut, the other in the air, as if he could feel the beat before it sounded. "Watch," he panted at me, "don't think."Look." He typedshort—short—longto a pipe, and the thin stream of smoke curved as if someone had taught it manners. Three arcs, two twitches, three steady puffs – the damned3–2–3was written in the air like an old joke that never really dies.

Ned grinned, held the rod like a scepter, pulled, blew, and thrust the ring toward a man whose teeth chattered. "Pass it on, brothers. If it's bad, let's do it together." The ring rolled under the slat, hung there like a gray halo, pretending to think. "False air," Conseil said dryly, and his hand turned the valve.by a touch; the halo slidsidewaysalong the edge as if he were looking for the door to the outside.

Then he came. Not stomping, not screaming—simplythereHelmet on his neck, glove on the plate, mouth empty, eyes dry. The bastard didn't need a sermon. He took the joint from Ned's hand as if taking scissors from a child, took a calm drag, blew the smoke into the ceiling, and let it fall back down like an order. "If you're going to do it," his shoulder said, "do it right." His glove stroked the pulpit:Air +½,Light up,Work +1. The room responded with a clean click, as if it had been waiting for the accursed rehearsal.

The glass teeth smoothed out all the wrinkles, white, hard, honest. Each of us suddenly looked like a photographic evidence. The additional touchAirhit me like a mild apology that comes too late; the extra toothWorkgrowled, as if to say that Lungs is only the shovel's advocate. Ned coughed, laughed, coughed again. "You see," he gasped, "he forbids it until he needs it."

Conseil nodded, as if drawing lines in an invisible notebook. He followed the smoke like a tracker: swirls on the flange, swirlsnoton the flange, a gentle pull on a clamp that worked cleanly yet breathed lightly. "There," he said quietly, "micro-leak." Nemo acted as if he had known it yesterday. He deliberately blew

against the bulkhead, once, twice, thenExactlyagainst the joint. The smoke passed over it, settled, trembled, disappeared into an invisible crack, and came out again an inch away – thinner, offended. The ship responded with a dulltokfrom the depths, not loud, just indecently appropriate.

The record clacked again, small and polite, and took the teeth out of the sound:Airstayed up,Lightheld out,WorkThere was still half a tooth left—as if we were now officially laboratory animals on shift. The men stared at the gray thread as if it were a map. "Something's wrong here," said someone who never said anything. "Nothing's ever right here," growled Ned, but his eyes remained on the leak.

The joint went on like a bad sacrament. One dragged and started laughing, so thin and false that it sounded like he was crying, only without courage. Another held the ash too long until it fell, glowing, onto his ankle; he didn't even flinch. Nemo let it burn to the limit, then tappedAir −½andLight +½, humiliating like a naked stage change: We should see where we breathe and feel how little. "Just a moment," I thought, "and we'll be kneeling again."

The smoke continued to write its school into the room. Three lines, two hangers, three quiet trails—orderly, almost mockingly accurate. Conseil applied the push-pull to two more valves, which only looked like valves to the initiated. "So," he murmured, "sosoundsit right." He gestured for me to put my hand on the pipe—ankleshort—short—long—and I did it without believing, only because my fingers believed it. The next puff of smoke took the turn like a train finally finding the right station.

"What about that one?" Ned pointed with his chin at a slat above the viewing window, where the air pretended to be solid. Nemo took a quick puff, sending the smoke like a messenger.straightagainst it. The circle bounced, broke open, crawledupwardsinto the slat and was gone, as if a tongue had been waiting there. "Noted," no one said. The plate nodded ttk –Work −½– a mild thank you notch for enlightened ignorance.

I sweated coldly. The depths placed their hand on the back of my neck, and my heart tried the wrong dance again. It took all the rest of Conseil's push-pull to push the dirt back into3–2–3to push. And just at that moment, I saw the old fairy tale in water on the bulkhead: two letters in the condensation, crooked, mirrored, defiant like gutter graffiti.N/A.Not a second later, an invisible finger tore it away; the lettering detached itself from the metal, slidupwardsunder the slat, as if he were signing there that we are being lied to.

"Enough," said Nemo's shoulder. The pipe stayed in his pocket, the smoke stayed ours. The men breathed, drew, and passed on. The room suddenly had a map of gray, and the bastard stood there reading it as if he had drawn it. I could have sworn thatwarm holeknocked in the side of the shipthree—two—threewith a touch of pride, because for once we did not seek the truth while drunk, butseenhad.

The grass was dirt, not a gift. Someone had stretched it, perhaps with the manure from the crates that had already been tied incorrectly. At first they were still laughing, that muffled laughter that sounds like rusty screws in the stomach. Then it all changed. Eyes glazed over, pupils dilated, heartbeats stuttered.2–3–2, no longer3–2–3The whole crew was wheezing in the wrong time, as if the joint had twisted the metronome key.

Ned took another deep breath, laughed, held the smoke in his chest until his shoulders shook. "Holy God," he spat, "even you couldn't get down here." Then he bent over, hands on his knees, laughing and choking on the same breath. Two guys behind him howled, without tears, just sounds that meant nothing. Conseil knelt between them, checking pulses, counting breaths, muttering commands that sounded like prayers: "Long—short—short. Hold on. Count." His fingers were red from their noses, which had started to bleed.

I felt the depth in my skull, as if a vice were squeezing the bones. The glass teeth above us flickered, staring at us all, cold, clinical, without patience. The record clicked:Air −1,Light up,Work +1. No pity, just a compulsion to see more clearly in the madness as the oxygen slipped from our hands.

Then the outside. There was nothing—should have been nothing. Just black, thick, old. But in the cone of smoke outside, something flickered, an edge, an outline. No fish, no current. Something moving parallel, so large that the view shifted before it could be fully realized. The ash from Ned's train pressed against the window as if it wanted to cross over.

Thewarm holehammered. Two hard blows, a pause, then one thatwanderedNo longer in my stomach. In my sternum. It rose upwards, through my ribs, through my throat, until my tongue vibrated. I swore it was a knocking that didn't come from outside, but pushed upwards from within. A greeting, a taunt, or both.

"Lick or tongue," Conseil muttered, eyes flickering, pupils narrow as pins. Ned screamed, "Fucking depth! Eat me or get me stoned!" and laughed again until he couldn't breathe.

And out in the blackness, the edge moved, slower than time, as if it were collecting the smoke we so carelessly gave away.

The embers dripped. At first just a small star, red and harmless, then it fell deeper, directly into the pile of gauze and fiber lying next to the slab. A curse, a scream, boots stamped, hands struck. The smell of burnt oil mingled with grass smoke, and for a moment I saw us all explode, torn to pieces like scrap in a scrap press. Conseil leaped forward, ripped up the rag, shook it, cursed in French, German, Latin, all at once. "You're mad! Fire down here, it's suicide!"

Nemo didn't laugh, Nemo didn't scream. He stepped forward, glove on the plate, so quietly it hurt.Air −1,Light full,Work remained.The lights burst open, white and brutal, as if someone had thrown us onto the police floor. Every scratch on our faces, every blister, every trace of vomit on our jackets was suddenly evidence, on display. The smoke hung heavy in the air, as if it wanted nowhere to go.

Ned growled, picked up the ember with two fingers, burned himself, but still grinned. "There, see? Hellfire. And we're the damn angels." He squashed the ember in the bucket, stared at Nemo, blood and ash on his fingers. Nemo slowly blew out the rest of the joint, as if he'd smoked it himself, and tapped the record.Light remained full, merciless, faces pale as shrouds.

The ash in the cone played its own game. It didn't swirl apart. It settled, blackish-gray, against the air like an invisible leaf, forming a map. Lines, blurred but clear: the corridor, the pipes, the hatch. A short line to the right, a longer one downward, a circle at the end. Conseil stared at it, his lips open. "It's drawing," he whispered, "it's drawing us."

The men remained silent. No one laughed, no one pulled. Only the scratching of the record, which clicked quietly, as if it were satisfied with the humiliation.Work +½, casual, almost mocking.

Then it happened. One of them blew a ring, small, crooked, a momentary joke. But it didn't fly, it didn't sink. It landed directly on the viewing window, a perfect circle, and stayed there. A gray imprint on the glass, so precise it looked like an eye staring back. We all saw it. Nemo too. And no one dared to breathe.

Nemo took the circle at the window like an invitation. He grabbed the rest of the butt, took a deep drag, as if he had lungs of iron, and didn't just blow the smoke out—he aimed. A stream against the bulkhead, right where Conseil had already had his finger. The vapor clung to the steel, crept along an edge,

trembled—and disappeared through a crack none of us wanted to see. An inch away, it came out again, thinner, offended, but real. "Lick," muttered Conseil, his voice as dry as dust. Nemo nodded, as if he'd already written it down.

Then he reached into a pocket, pulled out aFiber bundleOut, bound incorrectly, drawn up backwards. He held it up, turned it in the lamps so everyone could see the error. "Your prayer has spelling mistakes," he growled, like a dog pointing bones. Ned spat, grinning bloodily: "Then just read it backwards."

The record answered, obediently, as always.Work −1,Air +½,Light stable.A mercy in installments, as if he were giving us air just so we could stay on our knees longer. Men coughed, breathed, looked at him, hating him and loving the air at the same time.

Conseil took his spirit glass, poured out the rest of the gauze, and washed the blade. A sooty flake floated, neither staying at the bottom nor at the top. It stood sideways, in the middle, and began to spin, slowly, defiantly. Once, twice, three times.3–2–3.Like clockwork in the dirt. I saw it, Conseil saw it, Ned saw it. Nemo grinned.

"Fucking confessional," Ned growled, reaching for the glass and about to tip it out. Conseil snatched it away. "No." He looked at Nemo, who just laughed, quietly, without making a sound, and put the pipe back in his pocket.

The room stank of burnt grass, sweat, and mistrust. Every drag had made us deeper, not lighter. And the depths outside made sounds no one wanted to hear.

The depths sat on our tongues, bitter, salty, old. Every breath had made the air thicker, not lighter. The glass teeth above us burned brightly, as if trying to force confession. Men stood or squatted, each with his own mental cinema: one was still laughing, but without sound, one staring into the void as if there were a window there, one rocking in the wrong2–3–2, unable to come back.

Nemo didn't need to say anything more. The pipe stayed in his pocket; the power had long since stuck to his face. He stood there, legs apart, hands loose, and his shadow was taller than the men panting before him. Conseil had set the valves in push-pull, three fingers of scars, three fingers of hope. He counted quietly, as if he were trying to hold a fair with mathematics that was at least honest. Ned coughed, laughed, and raised his middle finger to the sky, which didn't exist here. "Fucking depth," he growled, "you'll eat, but you won't get me for free."

The plate answered, idiosyncratically: ttk. All three sliders –Air,Light,Work– jumped in unison, without gloves, without orders. Men looked up, one cursed, one made the sign of the cross with sooty fingers. Nemo just grinned, a millimeter in the face, like someone who knows the boat can now hear more than we can.

Outside, in the black cone, the circle of smoke still hung on the window, perfect, outrageous. Then came the moment when it broke the law: It dissolved. Not down, not up—it slid.upwardsSlowly, as if the glass had a gap that shouldn't have existed. The ring disappeared into it as if through a throat.

Silence. Everyone felt it in their sternum, like a knife being wielded without a hand. And then – from the depths – a singletok. No echo, no whirlpool, just that one sound, cold, final. We all held our breath, as if the shadow outside could hear him. Ned laughed softly, hysterically. Conseil closed his eyes and continued counting. Nemo stood there, grinning, and let us know: That wasn't the last move.

The ocean laughs at you

It didn't come like a shout. It came like a sneer, deep, short, from the belly of the steel. A singleHa, so low that it ran more on bone than on air. Then two behind, a little offset, as if someone were grinning in the dark. Men froze, cigarettes suddenly hanging too heavily from their lips. The gang held their breath, and my heart fell from the3–2–3into that small step where you realize that you still have room to fall.

Ned raised his head, bloody lip, crooked smile. "Come on," he said to the window, "if you have something to say, say it loudly." Conseil glued his ear to a pipe and immediately had his forehead covered in metal. "Distance... two... three..." he muttered, as if counting kicks.warm holepounded gently—three beats, the thirdsmall—only this time it didn't feel like us, but like an echo that was first born outside.

The plate snapped into position.Light −½,Air scarce,WorkHe let it stand erect like a funeral flag. The white of the lamps became narrow and austere, as if it wanted to make us into extras. No one spoke. Even Ned's tongue curled up briefly, like a dog that has learned to refrain from growling. Above us, a slat clicked, unauthorized, so quietly that it sounded more like a throat clearing.

Again theHaLonger. It ran along the longitudinal frame, made curves that could only be mocked, cut around a corner, trembled in a nut that should have been tightened. I watched this trembling until it turned the screw aroundhalf a toothturned—without a hand. "Resonance," whispered Conseil, which sounded as if he had said "sermon." His fingers tappedshort—short—longback, politely like an answer that doesn't want to crawl.

Nemo stepped out of the shadows, no rush, no show. Helmet on, glove on the plate, his whistle remained a threat in his pocket today. He raised his hand, and the room heard what he didn't say.Lightstilldown,Work +1,Air stable—Silence as a command, stamping as a muzzle. The men knelt without kneeling; there are postures that only the ribs can teach you.

The laughter wandered. Bulkhead to bulkhead, like a parade. Not fast, not loud—confident. A band of bubbles inflated briefly on the viewing window, so fine it looked more like skin. A ring came loose, crept across the glass, and drew a crookedgrin railand stuck. Ned almost laughed; he didn't. I smelled soot, salt, cold iron, and underneath it all, that note of "You're just pretending you have a choice."

"Listen to the intervals," Conseil said, "two long, two short, long again—almost like..." He paused because the word he wanted to say was too close to our heartbeat. Nemo didn't need syllables. His glove remained motionless, and that's precisely why the plate obeyed. The space narrowed without anything shifting.

I placed my hand on the wall. It vibrated at a frequency that felt as if it knew my name but didn't like the way it sounded. Condensation was written on the bulkhead in front of me. A few drops had arranged to meet and were doing what drops don't do: They wroteHa. Smallh, smalla, mirror-inverted and cheeky. Two drops broke away—not downwards, not to the side. They roseupwards, disappeared neatly beneath the slats, as if they had an appointment. The rest of the word remained standing, grinned, and then collapsed into the water, pretending it had never laughed.

The laughter moved around like a parade that no one had ordered. It wandered from the bulkhead at the viewing window into the narrow corridor, turned left, dipped under a pipe, scraped at a strut that had been begging for grease for weeks, and came out as a hollowHaBack out the fire hatch. No echo—intentional. You hear when something is meant for you.

The men held their tongues. One pressed his forehead against the cold metal, as if he could get another name there. One shoved his hands in his pockets, as if there were anything down there besides lint and debt. The glass teeth dimmed a little further, white became pencil, shadows became elbows. The record obediently buckled.Light further down,Work +1,Air stableNemo didn't even raise his head. His silence had long since become a uniform.

Conseil counted the pauses, fingers on the mother, who was breathing shallowly. "Two, three... now." And just then came the next thrust – deep, rough, a corner further, as if someone had dragged a chain over stone outside.warm holeanswered not politely, but defiantly:three—two—three, and behind the third blow lurked an ugly follow-up, too fat, too late, like a cough no one wants to admit. My sternum resented it and held onto it anyway.

Ned stood with his legs wide apart, his lips bloody, grinning too much. "Come in if you've got balls," he hissed toward the glass, quiet enough that only we filthy people heard. The laughter passed him like a street sign. He knockedshort—short—longto the pipe, a response without a request. The hull listened, remaining cynical.

In the cover between two frames, a residue of smoke from earlier still hung, gray like tiredness. It twitched when theHacame as if hair stood on end, which metal never had. Conseil turned a valveby a touch, applied the push-pull, and the smoke creptsidewaysHe lifted himself up onto a ledge, as if he wanted to get away from the mockery. "Frequency eats courage," he growled, "but not if you block its teeth." I nodded, although I understood nothing except the way his hands cut the room into small, obedient pieces.

Nemo remained a statue. Only the glove tapped once, almost lovingly.Workhe held it up as if we had to pay for the mockery with sweat.AirHe let it become more limited without changing the number—the kind of trick that works on ribs, not on gauges. The crew obeyed what no one said. Silence spread like a carpet under which dirt and dead bodies are hidden.

The laughter took a corner too early, hit a bulkhead, ran back, and laughed at being late. I smelled salt, old rubber, that bitter note that comes from ears that have experienced too much pressure. A man muttered, "Holy...", then gasped as if someone had pulled the rest of the word out of his throat. Ned snorted, raised his fist, and dropped it again. No punch line wanted to be seen with us today.

And then the small, indecent proof that mockery can live in metal happened. Directly above the viewing window, a bolt head made a singletik– delicate as a smile – and then stoodtwisted by thirty degrees. No hands on it, no tools, just mockery borrowing screws.

Ned stepped forward, so close to the viewport that his breath displaced the soot. His lips were bloody, his eyes like screws. "Eat me, you low motherfucker," he hissed, barely louder than a gnashing of teeth, and then he roared a singleHaso raw that it made the slats vibrate. He hammeredshort—short—longto the pipe, not as a request, but as a threat. Metal responded with a tired tremor that grinned rather than trembled.

Outside, the black one acted as if it had a sense of humor. A ring of bubbles broke away from somewhere in the cone, slowly moved over, and settled on the window – not round, but in a slanted shape.grin railpulled. It stuck like mockery on glass. The corridor held its breath. I smelled salt, cold bile, old rubber, and beneath it all, that subtle copper hue when nerves rub too close to teeth.

The record punished without warning.Air −½,Work +1,Lightremained narrow as eyelids. The ribs felt it immediately: less sky, more shovel. Nemo only had to stand. His shadow gave the sermon, his silence the rhythm. Conseil grabbed Ned by the elbow, hissed "Quiet," tapped the pipePush-pull, just a breath—but the air continued to bend, as if it had learned who it belonged to.

“Again!” Ned struck again:short—short—long, then theHa, deeper. The window took it like a slap. Outside, the grinning bar twitched, stretched a finger's breadth, as if it were laughing right into our mouths.warm holepounded3–2–3, the third blowsmall, but offended – as if the hull itself was fed up with customer service.

A man behind us muttered something holy and choked on it. The smoke from before twitchedsidewaysunder a slat when Ned's voice came, and lay still again when laughter from outside spilled over it. Conseil turned a valveby a touchup; a whispering sound settled over the scene like a dirty scarf. Not help—fewermockery.

Nemo raised his glove a finger's width—not even a command, just possession. The plate nodded:WorkAnother gear up. "Knees without knees," whispered my sternum, and I would have almost laughed if I'd still had some air left.

Then the little, obscene trick happened: Ned's scream stuck. Not in the room, not on the glass—in the shadow of the slats. You could see it, I swear: a tremblingWave, fine as thread, clipped into the shadows. She stood there a second too long, grinning like a belated echo—and only came loose when the bubble ring outside stopped twitching gently. Only then did theHaloose, narrow, late, and melted away in the stomach like a joke that comes too late.

Conseil tore himself away from the window and became the bastard we need when the world plays a wrong note. Ear to the pipe, finger to the nut, eyes dry as chalk. "This will eat us in the longitudinal frame," he growled. "Not loud—"correct." He knockedshort—short—longback, not as a test of courage, but like a mechanic counting the wrong pipes on an organ. My stomach responded with a hesitant hum, as if considering whether it was still ours.

He turned a valveby a touchup—no gesture, a precision. A thin murmur crept into the corridor, settled like a dirty shawl over the laughter. The mockery outside came again, deeper, tried to march through—and stumbled. Smoke, hanging somewhere in the metal, twitched.sidewaysas if he had just learned decency. “Push-pull,” said Conseil, “wedetunethe stomach.” His hands moved on: second valvea touch to, thirdon. Every movement so small that it seemed offensive—and precisely for that reason a weapon.

Ned supported a man whose knees went weak as he laughed at the water. "Stand up, you fool," he hissed, "we won't let an aquarium fool us." He tapped the pipe next to Conseil's beat—short—short—long—, raw, but within reason. The laughter bounced off the corner, lingered for a heartbeat, as if it were getting a toothache, and then rolled on, offended, more quietly.

The glass teeth above us became clairvoyant. Conseil raised a finger. "Now." The glove on the plate stirred—not Nemo's, but the reflection from the boat. Ttk.Air +½,Light up,Work −1. Millimeter grace, not for souls, formaterial. I breathed deeper, not freely, justpossibleThe white of the lamps developed edges where defects can be seen before they are lit.

"Ballast?" asked Ned, more mockingly than suggesting. "A tooth," said Conseil, jutting his chin as if the hull were a scale. Two men threw their weight against the right railing, no drama, just bodies as wrenches. The fore-and-aft sighed, long and offended. The laughter slipped into a pitch that sounded less painful and more like work.

Outside, the black was performing its tricks. Bubbles, fine as dust, danced in a line as if they wanted to write "haha," but they were missing school. Inside, the

smoke test continued: threads on flanges, swivels on clamps that suddenlynoThere were no more eddies. "There," murmured Conseil, "here." He shifted the counter-clock position by one frame, gave the belly a polite kick, and the metal responded with a hum that reeked of yes.

The record clacked again, a polite servant at a cynical pulpit.Workstayed down,Lightheld his stance,AirHe breathed like a meager wage. Nemo stood there and did nothing, which is precisely his trick: When physics preaches to you, all you have to do is think "Amen." His eyes remained dry. His boots said "go on."

The laughter came again, tried a long arc, and lost interest halfway through. It scraped against a strut that had previously wanted to sing, and managed only a hoarse cough. "See?" Conseil wiped the blood from his lip. "Resonance broken. No more choir. Just pipes." Ned grinned crookedly. "So we're laughing now, aren't we?" No one laughed. We did the math.

I rested my forehead against the bulkhead. It no longer vibrated mockingly, but matter-of-factly, like a heart remembering work. The rhythm in my sternum began to settle again:3–2–3, dutiful, dirty, ours. Thewarm holeknocked—one, two—and the third knock did what he had never done before: He rosehigh. Not louder, not harder—upwardsFrom the belly to the ribs, from the costal arch to the neck, as if the torso itself were receiving the answer from the depths within uscarry up. I swallowed them down, and the room acted like it was normal.

The laughter stopped, only to return an idea later, orderly, cheeky. No longer justHa, ratherspeech– three deep bows, two short hooks, three staggered follow-ups, as if someone were playing typewriter on our torso with a rusty fork. It ran through our ribs, made screws tingle, and I swore even the glass teeth up above held their breath to listen.

"That's a sentence," Conseil growled, not loudly, just definitively. He traced a line in the soot on the bulkhead: three long, two short, three rising. "Answer requires direction." He tappedshort—short—long, but not into the pipe – on theplateThe room pricked up its ears, if steel has ears. Nemo stepped halfway forward, his whistle still in his pocket, his glove hanging in the air like a metronome that hasn't been released yet.

He didn't need words.Lightgot a touch more,Airremained close,Work −1– not mercy, just a change of course in millimeters. The men felt it in their knees, not on the gauges. Laughter responded – the same grammar, the emphasis

different: two short, three long, then three that sounded like steps down. "Depth," said Conseil's look, and Nemo nodded so little that it was hateful.

Ned spat, grinning crookedly, as if he'd just told the abyss a bad joke. "We're not going to let a pool guide us." Nevertheless, he stood wide in the aisle, holding two men by the railing as if one of them was about to pull. Outside, the darkness vibrated, not visible, only palpable; a pressure on his teeth that tasted like tongue.warm holepounded3–2–3with a nervous stutter after the third beat, an almost swallowed yes.

“Listen to the pauses,” said Conseil, and his finger wandered to the instruments.manometerhung – nobody knew how, nobody wanted to know – aFiber bundle, small, clean, butknotted incorrectlyA greeting, a sneer, a handwriting. Ned tore it down, stepped on it as if meaning could be crushed. Right next to it was abrass pinin a clamp, clean, shiny – and the notch in it wasmirror-invertedI felt my saliva turn bitter. It wasn't just the water talking. Someoneherewrote along.

The laughter outside modulated again: three – two – three, but mirrored, as if someone were holding up a stupid mirror to us. Nemo gently placed two fingers on the record, and it followed with a brief ttk.Light up,Work stable,Air +½No drama, just a course. The boat's belly tilted slightly to starboard, so small that it was more a thought than a maneuver. And the laughter... it moved with us, accompanying us, not chasing us. Or both.

“He wants us to leave,” someone whispered. “Or he wants us to stay right here.” Both sounded right. Conseil put thePush-pullover the pipes, pushed with three valvesa touchAir to where resonance grew teeth. Smoke residue from old guilt arcedsidewaysinto the corners when his rhythm was right; when not, they trembled like dogs before a thunderstorm.

I sought support in the small one, because the big one had too many teeth. There it was, inconspicuous as always: thespirit glass, half full, sooty glitter inside like a drowned star. Conseil rinsed his blade, and the glass absorbed the laughter without a sound. The glitter spun, hesitantly at first, then cleanly. One line, another, two blurred letters that each of us had seen everywhere:N/AThey didn't stay on the ground. They didn't obey gravity, not fear, not us. The brownish trail detached itself from the belly of the glass, climbedupwardsup the wall, pretty as a lie with good manners, and disappeared under the edge as if someone had signed up there.

The laughter turned. At first it was just a final sneer—then it becamesuction. The belly became crooked shoulders, as if someone outside had grabbed the ribs andsidewaysOutside, in the harsh white of the lamps, aedgeOut of nowhere: not fish, not current—a wall. Black-gray, grainy, close enough that the eyes lost focus. The viewing window became small, like an excuse. Steel sang, a sound like a knife on a plate.

Nemo was there immediately, no word, just a glove.Full light. Work +2. Air −½.The glass teeth burst open—a glaring interrogation. The floor vibrated like a dog that hates the command "down." Men grabbed at anything with an edge. One slipped; Ned grabbed him by the collar, shoved another against the railing. "Stand, you fool! If anyone's going to kiss, it's me!" The hull lurched sideways, as if it had made a bad plan and still wanted to see it through.

Conseil hammeredshort—short—longinto the pipe, not nice,necessary. Valve oneto breathe on, twoto, threeon"Detunen, you bastard," he gasped, and the thin noise that came from it settled like a dirty bandage over the suction.warm holepounded3–2–3, the third blow rosehigherthan usual—not a threat, a command to courage. My sternum obeyed, even though my knees went weaker.

The edge outside scraped past the light, rough as concrete. A set of bubbles moved along it, as if somethingBigexhale. The belly responded with a long, offended sigh and swung a finger's breadth, not much, just enough to make the wall slide from the window to the slats. "One more tooth of ballast to starboard," Conseil snarled. Two men dropped to the ground, their bodies as tools. The tension in the ship tilted a millimeter, palpable like a new word in the throat.

Nemo heldWorkabove like a knee in the back;Airstayed close so that no one would shout before he started working. I heard screws moving, this fineKrk, when threads think. Wisps of smoke from before duckedsidewaysin corners, when the counter-beat hit; where it was missing, they twitched like nerves. The laughter came again, long, dragging, trying to push us back into the wall—and bit into the noise. It became dull. It became work. It became ours.

Ned held the two of them to the railing, teeth bared, eyes stubborn. "Breathe, you dogs.Long—long—short." His hand drummed against steel, and I swore the hull nodded: a muffled "hm," sounding like respect no one wants to pay. Outside, the edge slid out of the cone, turning black again, pretending it's empty. Inside, the color returned to the faces, ugly, but real.

The record stood in the floodlight like a pulpit.Airhigh,Lighthard,Workat the limit—three teeth, three mouths. And then the world did its obscene trick: In the bright cone that fell from the lamps over the shutters, the three shadows formeda grin. Not broad, not nice—a crooked snout made ofAir,Light,WorkFor a heartbeat, the pulpit grinned at us as if the joke belonged to it. Ttk. The sliders sprang flush. The grin disappeared as if it had never been there.

Then there was calm. Not peace—calm that irritates you like a tie that's too tight. His stomach fell back into its3–2–3, tidy like an accountant who hates you. The glass teeth burned soberly, no flickering, just that cool brightness that lists you. Men stood, squatted, held their breath in their throats as if they might need it later. One laughed briefly, twice, both times too briefly, as if someone had pulled the end of the laughter out of his mouth. After that, no one laughed.

The outside edge was gone, as if a giant had put it in his pocket. Only awet semicircle, crooked, thin, like the corner of a mouth after a bad punchline. Ned stared at him, bloody lip, wide boot. "Did you laugh?" he whispered, not to the window, not to us—to the whole damned depths. He got no answer, only the quiet working of screws pretending to be innocent.

Conseil paced the aisles like an altar boy who, stunned, returns to his church. Fingers on valves,a touchon,a touchto—push-pull remains, but quieter, so that no one notices how much of it we need topossibleto stay. He typedshort—short—longto a pipe, almost tenderly. Thewarm holepounded with:three—two—three, and the third blow fell once tremblinghigheragainst my ribs, as if asking if we'd noticed. I nodded against the metal without thinking.

Nemo put his whistle away, slowly, as if showing it to someone afraid of things in their pockets. Hands empty, eyes dry. He stood at the plate as if at a pulpit and did nothing. This very nothingness was the command.Airstayed where you can still work but not discuss.Lightkept us open like files.Workstood a tooth lower than before—grace in formatlaterHe smiled millimeter-small, the smile of a cash register that's right.

Ned wanted to say something and didn't, instead spitting soot that clung to the slat like a signature without a name. One of the boys removed a piece of fiber from the railing, knottedopen,half,to– three small crosses on a crack that we all know. Conseil saw it, said nothing, left it there like a landmark. Someone stuck thebrass pinback in the clamp, this timecorrectnotched, and acted as if there had never been a mistake.

The wet semicircle on the window held up. Water slowly beaded off, not downwards, butsidewaysAs if the glass had an opinion. I could still smell the remains of the joint, the cheap sweetness mixed with metal and the tired breath of the engine. The ship hummed quietly; not mockingly, not friendly—businesslike.

"Continue," no one said, but it was written everywhere. We began to clean up, that kind of order that only exists so that chaos doesn't realize it's winning. Shovels back, buckets turned upside down, rags soaked in spirit.spirit glassstood there, faithful, a sooty spangle in it, slowly3–2–3turned as if he wanted to lend us his pulse when we lost ours. I stared until I felt sick from such honest trifles.

In the silence, a foreign word sounded. No sound from outside. Adry giggle, thin, short—byinsideNot loud, not for long. A single "kh," somewhere in the bulkhead where there are no throats. Men froze. Ned raised his head like a dog given the wrong whistle. Conseil blinked once, and his finger paused over the valve as if it had been holding its breath there. Nemo was no longer smiling. He was listening.

Then the world did the trick that never takes long and yet remains forever. A single droplet detached itself from the edge of the viewing window. It didn't do what drops do. It grew, round, clean, and lifted itself.upwardsas if he were being pulled by a joint that no human had ever built. He crawled into the gap between the glass and the frame,disappeared, without a trace, without gravity. Ttk made the record, polite as always. The3–2–3remained. The corner of his mouth dried by the window. And somewhere not far away, a laughter set aside his next breath.

Blood on the tiles

He lay on his back like a bad secret, in the middle of the corridor between the galley and the washroom. Tiles that seemed like hospitals, but soot and guilt were embedded in every crack. The red crept out from under his neck, finding the cracks like water finds a way, only more greedily. Iodine already hung in the air, spirit, cold iron; the smell made you realize that hope here is just another word for gauze.

The lamps above—our damnedGlass teeth—went from gloomy to discerning, a clinical white that knows no excuses. The record clicked obediently:Light up,Air

+½,Work −1. Stage, no mercy. The belly of the boat continued to drum its3–2–3, but more quietly, as if he were declaring the hallway to be a church.

"Move aside," Ned growled, stance wide, boots like barriers. One tried to pass—Ned just pointed with his chin at the bucket, which still smelled of the last mass. "Not over it, you fool." He pinched his lip, blood on his tooth, sensing strife in the air like a dog sniffs rain. The red reached his sole, stopping a finger's breadth short, as if it respected the wrong shoes.

Conseil was already kneeling, his fingers on the carotid artery that felt like a bad cable. "Alive," he said, "for now." Hands quick, heart dry. Gauze under the head, pressure on the wound, iodine, which burned like honest answers. "Long—long—short," he murmured to his chest, and the chest did what bodies do when words sound like commands. One held the lamp lower; Conseil ran his gaze over the patterns: splash height, angle, skid mark. Not sentimental—protocol.

Nemo came like a signature: boots, gloves, and whistle in the shadows, only threatening. He said nothing, he didn't have to. His proximity made the hallway narrower. The record did the next curtsy all by itself—or because we wanted to see it that way.Lightremained tough,Airleft room for thinking,WorkHe stood a tooth lower, so no one could claim that work had killed him. A courtroom, no judge's robes, just tiles.

The crew moved to the edge, eyes wide, mouths small. One whispered "accident," one "bump," no one "me." A rag hung on the hook, played cleanly, but theFiber bundleIt had been threaded backward, a sloppy intention in clean white. Ned saw it, smiled crookedly, and said nothing. Conseil saw it too; his gaze wrote it down on an invisible list.

Thewarm holein the side of the ship pounded crookedly in my ribs—one, two, the thirdsmall—as if nodding in agreement that today, rhythm reveals more than tongues. I saw the handprint on the edge of the doorframe, below, too low for a fall from above. "Bottom left," Conseil murmured, "not above." Mean: someone had pushed, not gravity. The white of the lamps made the sentence obscenely clear.

"Hold your head like this," Ned said, not gently, just properly, and shoved his fist under his skull to keep it from drenching itself in its own red. His boots were wider than courage required, narrower than fear allowed. I held the bottle of spirits, the mirror inside burning my eyes from within, and I briefly wished the floor were wood—forgive me, wood. File tiles.

And just then, the world did its dirty little physics. A drop broke away from the edge of a larger blob. It should have run, along the tile, following the joints like a good thief on the run. Instead, it stayed.standRight on the edge, as if the ground there sloped slightly upwards. It shone, grew for a moment, did nothing—and waited, as if someone had yet to decide which story it would fall into.

"Lockdown," no one said, and yet everyone knew what it meant. Boots to the edges, mouths closed, breathing in installments. Nemo stood in the middle like a street sign that brooks no discussion. His glove hovered a finger above the sign, more threat than movement. They understood, though:Light −½,Air stable,Workstayed down. The white took on the color of a dentist—enough shame in the spotlight that everyone suddenly recognized his marks.

Ned spread his arms, pushing back two idiots who were about to play justice with the bucket. "Whoever wipes now will wipe themselves clean." His boots were in the dry, a line between red and the rest. One grumbled, Ned just raised his eyes—that was enough.

Conseil had long since been in the report. He briefly placed his forehead against Tile, as if he needed to hear it, not see it, then worked with two fingers like a caliper. Drop spacing—one, two, three. "That way," he panted, his chin nodding toward the galley door. He laid a strip of gauze across a track, twisted it, and the thread pattern revealed arrowheads no one wanted to see. "Shoe edge out," he grumbled, "no slipping. Kick."

I smelled iodine and some cheap lemon cleaner that shouldn't even be available here. A rag, pristine white, hung over the hook, as innocent as an excuse. Only theFiber bundlewas at the ringincorrectly drawnRough, quick, knowing. Conseil tapped him with the hilt of his knife, letting him swing. "He wanted to come here," he said, "not leave." Ned grinned crookedly, but his eyes were hard, calculating.

Nemo still didn't utter a word. He didn't need to. His presence made the corridors narrow.platewaited like a dog for the next command; she didn't get one – so she continued with the humiliation:Lightdown enough that the joints looked like writing,Airhumane, but not forgiving.warm holepounded3–2–3with an extra heart after the third beat, so small that it's easy to miss in anger.

Conseil knelt again, tracing a splash. "Angle sixty, not forty," he murmured. "Hip height." He wiped his nose with the back of his hand, blood on blood. "Not a fall, not a slip. A push." He placed the blade against the threshold of the

galley, scraping a reddish mark that ran almost invisibly into the silver. "We'll clean up afterward—but this time we'll write first."

One of his men lifted the bucket again, too early, too well-behaved. Ned placed his boot on the handle and nodded towards the plate. "If theyWork +1says, you can play hero. Until then: decoration." The man lowered his eyes, breathed, and held. The smell of the spirits grew stronger, as if someone were invisibly refilling the bottle.

I followed a broad, dark tongue that had run from the neck of the lying man into the joints. It forked, leaving streaks where hands had tried to hold something that was already falling. In one of the streaks stood half a palm. Not flat, not panicky—pressed. Bottom left of the door frame. The brass there had a fine scratch in the wrong direction. It matched theinverted waistbandlike two lies that know each other.

Conseil presented thespirit glassnext to the wound, not for rinsing – as a clock. The sooty flakes inside made their little turn,3–2–3, patient as a metronome for nerves. Nemo saw it, saw us, saw the tiles. I swore he'd known long ago whose shoe it was; he only made us work so we'd learn to hate it ourselves.

"No one goes into the galley," said Ned, and his voice held more law than any glove. "Not until I..." He broke off because something small and indecent happened in the red.

A thin thread emerged from the main blob, shimmering brightly in dentist's white. It should have run to the deeper groove that lay directly in front of it, a clear, well-behaved path. Instead, it bentsidewaysNot much, a cigarette paper wide. He crawled into thefalseNut, uphill against the slope, as if following a magnetic "no" that wasn't meant for us. He drew a neat, narrow line in the wrong direction and hung there as if someone had whispered "this way" in his ear.

Conseil transformed the man on the floor into a body again. No hero, just unfinished flesh. A pressure bandage on it, gauze stuffed, iodine like a scream. "Hold the light," he hissed, and the glass teeth gave way.Light up, cold, clinical, without comfort. Theplateremained polite:Air +½,Worknot to touch – an official “power”, not a “must”.

"Long—long—short," Conseil murmured into his chest, his tongue dry, and his chest obeyed stubbornly. I held the bottle, Ned held his head, Nemo held the corridor together by simply standing in the way. The pulse returned like an

offended animal. "There," said Conseil, "there you are." He didn't take permission; he justified it.

When the pressure held, we looked, as one always does too late. No panic in the tracks—no skidding. Edges, angles, arrows. Ned knelt beside the streaks, traced a hand's length along the print. "See?" His finger tapped the half-hand stuck to the bottom of the frame. "Not lifted up."Pressed." He stood up, measured his hip, and pointed out the angle to the splash field. "Hit height: hip. From the bottom left. Someone who knows how to push a board against an edge." He spat red, smiled without humor. "Accident, my balls."

Conseil nodded without cheering. "Sixty-degree spray angle," he said, "no slipping, no dancing. Stable. Someone wanted someone to lie here." He pushed the gauze against the wound, adjusting the pressure until the red from the pulse turned to a ooze. Then he ran the blade over the threshold. A fine, fresh scratch in the brass, flat,incorrect– as if a point had pressed down from below, not a weight from above. "That doesn't fit with traps."

Nemo stepped to the door, his glove on the frame, as if listening to what metal prefers to keep quiet. Not a word. His shadow reached into the cut. The plate did nothing, thus giving more than a command.Airremained civilized,Lightkept indecently honest,Workstood still like a listener who already knows the lie.

"The shoes?" I asked too loudly. Ned put his own shoes next to the track. Not the same edges. The ones in the blood had a small worn corner on the front right, missing like a tooth. "The colleague with the tooth," he muttered. "ThesameSlipped on the boiler this morning? Tell the joke to someone else." His voice was quiet, like a threat.

Conseil pointed with his chin at the rag on the hook. White, pious, ready.Fiber bundlewasincorrectly drawn, knot against the hand, not with it. "This was prepared." He didn't untie it, left it hanging as a statement. A shadow passed over Nemo's boot; the hall didn't need any more judgment.

The man on the tiles wheezed. Conseil pressed. "Breathe, you fool. Don't die yet—you owe us information." His hands remained clean in the mechanics: two fingers on the carotid artery, the other hand on the bandage, not tenderly, justcorrectThe belly of the boat grabbed us under the sternum,3–2–3, and once laid asmallthird blow on top, as if he were signing the sentence.

Ned reached for the frame, bent down, sniffed, and cursed. "Lemon cleaner. Who cleans here before asking?" His gaze wandered along the edge, lingering

on a screw. "There." Abrass pinin the doorbell, shiny as new –Notch mirrored. Not retracted, deployed. Someone had talked dirty here with clean fingers. Ned laughed once, without a voice. "It's enough for preaching."

The men at the edge grew quieter as the tiles spoke more clearly. One stepped back, one step too far—his boot scraped the dry checkerboard of tiles without touching the red, and yet it sounded like guilt. Nemo didn't look at him, and yet he hit him. The tile moved.not. No punishment in teeth, just this coldFurther.

Conseil adjusted his headlamp, polished the eye of the wound with spirit that smelled like "Now" and burned like "Later." "He's alive." He tied it tighter. "No heroic act. He's alive." Then he stood up, went over the evidence like a land registry official: splash field, droplet chain, fiber on the hook, scratch, boot tooth. "Body says: happened. Tiles say:made."

I set thespirit glassbeside the heel of the person lying down, more out of superstitious politeness than any real reason. The sooty spangles in it had just3–2–3Now he did something that made my stomach rise. He didn't sink or rise. He stoodacross. Right in the middle. As if he were standing on an invisible edge, claiming that the truth has two sides—and both are as smooth as tile.

Ned saw it, Conseil saw it, Nemo saw it. No one commented. The air in the corridor became heavy, like a sentence waiting for a verb.warm holepounded a short, impudentYesin my ribs. I believed him, even though Stahl lies when men ask.

"Secure," Conseil finally said, without looking up. "Everything—before some hero washes history with a bucket." Ned nodded and nevertheless remained standing between the red and the rest, his boots like clamps. And when the lying man opened his eyes wide and hated the lamp, I knew: The body will talk. But the tiles have long since done it.

He turned the hallway into a courtroom without saying a word. Boots centered, gloves half-raised, his pipe visible like a law in his pocket. He needed no "who?", no "why?" His silence laid down the questions like knives.platewas the first to understand: ttk –Light full,Work +1,Airremained on edge. The white became merciless, gleaming at every joint and turning every drop into a statement.

"I found him," one said too quickly. "I've been here," another said too smoothly. Two sentences that ate each other up, both with clean boots, too clean for the room. Ned put the bucket sideways, handle against shin, grinning

like a bouncer. "Step through my joke if you're in a hurry." No one kicked. One did lift the rag—Ned dropped the bucket. Metal screamed, water sloshed, the man froze, guilt in his hand. "Another hero, and I'll mop with him."

Conseil continued his makeshift protocol: muslin bag open, blade clean, gaze cold. "You were where?" He pointed to the galley, then to the scratch in the brass, then to the track that wanted to go uphill into the wrong groove. The man flinched. "I..." "Leave it," Ned snapped. "Your sentence is dripping." He pointed to the worn corner on the front right of the third man's boot—the tooth that had been laughing everywhere today. The third man put his foot behind the other, too late.

Nemo just moved his eyes. That was enough. Theplatenodded a little, tangible, barely visible:Workstayed up there, as if truth had to sweat before it spoke.Lightkept their faces open like files.Airremained expensive. "Again," no one said. "Where was who standing when the head was learning the tile pattern?"

Their tongues grew heavy. “Slip,” one murmured, “I just saw…” – “You didn’t see anything,” Conseil interrupted, “a white rag was already hanging there.wrongSomeone was waiting." He tapped the knife handle against the ring: the ring backwards, clean as if it were intentional. "And the pen," Ned growled, raising thebrass pinfrom the clamp, "was just notched wrong. Now correctly. A miraculous conversion." He put it backcorrectas if he were straightening the head of a saint.

The lying man wheezed, rose briefly, and fell back into the bandage. Conseil pressed life back to his chest. "Breathe," he said, "the truth must wait." He rewound the gauze, tore off the tape with his teeth, and turned blood into a ooze. There was no comfort in his eyes, onlyaccuracy.

One of the spectators couldn't stand the white anymore, bent over, pretending he wanted "just the edge." The rag slid down, almost swallowing the little red tongue that had just shown us the way. Ned stepped hard on the rag, twisting his boot. "Wrong direction," he hissed, "that's how people who like to forget wipe." The man jumped up, there was a slap, more shame than pain. Nemo's eyes remained dry.platestirredWorknot a millimeter; punishment remainedmanually.

"Thrust height." Conseil placed the butt of a knife on his hip, pointing the blade into the splash guard. "Sixty. Bottom left. No coincidence." He pointed to the mark on the frame: half a hand, edge of thumb, pressure. "That one," Ned

grumbled, looking at the Tooth Man. "Were you going to teach him how to kneel?" The Tooth Man opened his mouth; there wasn't enough air for lies.

"Toward the galley," Conseil continued, "and back—only then down. Two ways, but only one tells. Who turned back before the body fell?" He didn't even raise his head. The fake bundle on the hook swung gently. The lemon scent returned—too fresh.

Nemo took two steps, no more. That was enough to narrow the aisles. He positioned himself so that everyone at the edge could see their own reflection in the white: stains, scratches, old guilt. "Cleaning too early is an insult," his shoulder said. "Cleaning too late is treason." His hand remained over the countertop, a sermon without sound.

The tooth man was breathing too loudly. "He has... he is..." he stammered, the "slip" between his teeth like wet cardboard. Ned twisted his boot against the tile until it scratched. "Say 'press.' Enjoy it." The man was silent, swallowed. Conseil placed seconds on his chest, counting them with his pulse and rhythm.

The silence was so bright it burned. And that's when the belly made its indecent comment.warm holepounded—one, two—and the third beat climbedhigh. Not louder, not stronger.HigherIt settled directly under my sternum, remained there for a heartbeat like a stamp over a statement, and then slowly seeped back into the steel. The men looked at each other, no one understood, all knew enough.

Conseil took the rag from the hook not like a piece of cloth, but like a statement. He held it by two knuckles, twisting it in clinical white. "Open, half, closed," he murmured, the three fingers like a prayer no one believes anymore. "That's how you tie when you're in a hurry and stillcorrectwants to be." He pointed to the ring. "And that's how you tie it if you want itincorrectlooks like." TheFiber bundleIt was tucked in backward, against his hand, the edge inward—a knot that lies before it ties. He laid the rag next to the track, and the way the fiber lay—stubborn, scratchy—says: prepared, not done.

Ned ran his thumb over the edge of the ring, checked the flesh for splinters, and bit down on red. "This isn't an accidental knot. This is aSentence." He glanced at the Tooth Man, then at the doorframe. "Someone here has knotted the truth in front of the lenses so that later we'll think they're stupid." He stepped next to the half-hand on the frame, knelt, placed his own print next to it, turned his wrist, felt the angle. "Bottom left. Pressure, not pulling. My

shadow says you held it until it lay the way you needed it." The Tooth Man stared at the floor as if there were a priest's hole there.

Conseil slid the blade into the scratch in the brass, gently, as if patting a saint's bump. "Notch reflects," he said—mirror-inverted, so neat that it seems cowardly. "Someone placed the pin incorrectly and then**—**" He paused. Ned was already raising thebrass pinup, showed the wrong notch, turned it, pushed itcorrectback. The click was indecently satisfying. "—corrected, as if God had suddenly become fussy." Conseil nodded curtly. "The same one who weaves things the way you don't weave them."

The men on the periphery became a tone smaller. One rubbed his boot sole on the dry checkerboard tiles, as if friction could create innocence.platedid what she rarely does: she forgot herself. A hack in time, barely audible, but in her ribs like a knife handle:2–3–2. Wrong heart, a quick gulp of disgust. Ned and I looked up at the same time. Ttk. The pulpit attendant recovered, pushed back the notches,3–2–3clean again, as if the boat had apologized.

"You were in the galley," Conseil said to the tooth man, not questioning. "Before." The man shook his head, too slowly. "Lemon cleaner on your sleeve," Conseil continued, "and the hem of the rag was backward. You wanted to wipe away the first arrow." He raised the rag and pointed at the fiber:to, whereopenshould have been. "You prayed wrong." Ned grinned crookedly at the word, but his hands rested firmly on the bucket, as if keeping it from tipping in the wrong direction.

The man lying there hissed for air, coming back with a rusty sound. Conseil pressed the bandage down, without taking his eyes off the trail. "Breathe," he said, and his chest obeyed like a worker who has another hour. "You're alive because we want you to," Ned added quietly, "not because anyone here shows mercy." Nemo stood there like a gallows from which no one has yet hung—sober, patient. His glove hovered over theplate, and this floating alone held all tongues still.

I followed the broad, red tongue with my eye over the joints. Where it had turned uphill—the impudent sideways turn—it licked against the base and remained thin, as if afraid of heights. A mosquito clung to the edge, smelling of iron, of yes. "Track one," I murmured, "don't clean it." Ned nodded. "We'll leave track two for him as a path—so he'll stumble if he denies it." He drew a small semicircle with the toe of his boot.beforethe tooth man, glistening wetly. "This is your mouth. Keep it shut if you want to lie."

Conseil sorted pieces of fiber from his pocket: a bunchopen, onehalf, onetoHe placed them on the threshold like three ugly hosts. "Language," he said, "for people who are too cowardly to speak." He typedshort—short—longto the frame; thewarm holerepliedthree—two—three, the third blowa touch higheras if the hull were handing us a pencil. Nemo didn't blink. His silence caused the room to sign the protocol itself.

"Say 'press,'" Ned demanded, not loudly. "Say it, and I'll let you brush." The tooth man worked on his Adam's apple, unable to find a word. His shoes had the missing tooth on the front right, red in the groove. He saw him, too. He saw us. He saw the record. It remained silent, and that's precisely why it was loud.

I raised my eyes to the bulkhead, because sometimes you have to look somewhere else to avoid striking. There stood Condensation, shy, cold. Two drops began to do what they weren't allowed to do: They wroteN. The line grewupwards, against everything I know about surfaces. Next to it, aA, crooked, defiant, mirror-inverted. The two letters detached themselves from the wall at the same time, clean as if torn from a notebook, slidhighunder the slat – and disappeared as if they had an audience.

"Noted," Conseil said into the silence, which even made the smell of the spirit faint. Nemo lowered the glove by a finger, not enough for a click. It was enough.Workstayed where it hurts,Lightstayed where it was ashamed,Airmade us think further. The hallway breathed a slow exhalation. Ned stepped back from the bucket, just a step, but just enough for the tooth man to see how thin the mercy was.

"Push," the tooth man finally said, barely audibly, and looked away as if the word had teeth. Ned nodded, not satisfied, just finished. "Good. Now you wipeourm beat.” Conseil put the rag in his hand,correcttied, open. The plate was silent. The boat listened. And the red on the tiles waited—a breath, two—before it decided to go into thecorrectdirection to run.

The tooth man was handed the rag like a judgment—correcttied, open, so he had nowhere to hide. Conseil stood beside him, two fingers on the pipe, the blade in his pocket, and kept time like an organist with anger in his heart.Short—short—long.Wipe.Short—short—long.Wringing it out. Anyone who fell out of step had to go back, and then do the same thing again until the joints remembered who they belonged to. Ned stood over it like a curse with his boots on, counting out loud, grinning crookedly. "Clean it up, but keep it true."

Theplatenodded coldly.Air −½,Work +1,Lightremained in dentist white. Punishment in millimeters. The lungs became small, the arms heavy, the heads empty—exactly how order likes to taste. Thatwarm holepounding in the hull3–2–3, the third blow is not small, buthigh, exactly where anger seeks to find expression. I heard steel breathing, and wished for a breath of wood that forgets.

The Tooth Man wiped, and his breathing suddenly had manners. Ned led him along the rhythm like a dog. "Leave the arrow here," he said, pointing to the thin red tongue thatuphilltracked to the wrong groove. "Don't go over there. That's our guide." He let the tip of his bootsmall semicirclein front of the galley door—wet, shiny, cheeky. "Back away. For later. For you." The tooth man nodded, looked at no one, and continued wiping, obediently, quickly, hurriedly.

Conseil turned plastering into mechanics: jointsacrosspeel off, streaksalongHe bundled them together, forcing drops to the edges until they became arrows. He marked with gauze what could remain: half a hand on the frame, the scratch in the brass, the mark toward the door. He muttered numbers as if they were psalms for people who cannot believe. "One—two—three. Return. Again." The tooth man obeyed, scraped, wrung, coughed. Iodine burned, spirit sang, lemon cleaner acted as if it were bottled innocence.

Nemo stood in the white like a gallows without a rope. He didn't need to whistle. His glove hovered over the record, and the record kept our throats short.Workabove like a knee in the back,Airas short as patience,Lightmerciless. Some men took a step back of their own accord, not out of shame—out of fear of wiping the wrong person. One tried a joke that had no teeth; he died in the bucket.

I wore thespirit glassafter Conseil's boots, not out of superstition, but because I wanted to see if the little clock in the dirt was ticking for us. The sooty spangles spun3–2–3, tough, patient, and every time the tooth man lost his rhythm, the tinsel twitched2–3–2and then, insulted, stood up straight again. "Tact," hissed Conseil without turning around. The tooth man gritted his teeth, wipedshort—short—long, and the tinsel gave peace.

Ned checked, as only someone who doesn't believe that cleanliness is ever innocent can check. "Not like this. Like this." His boots placed cleats at the end of the track, leaving a wafer-thin line toward the galley, "so the truth will find its way home if someone starts acting nice again." He bent down, sniffed, cursed. "No more lemon miracles. Just steel and sweat." The tooth man nodded, trembled, wiped.

As the large, red tongues disappeared, leaving only marked signs, the smell changed. More alcohol, less blood. More guilt, less drama. The corridors reflected faces they didn't like. Conseil smoothed the joint at the threshold, placed gauze in a cross shape over the damp tongue so no one could "accidentally" step on it. The men breathed again, small, cautious, as if they knew that air wasn't theirs today.

And then the room cast its ugly spell. Directly beneath the lamp, in the cold white, a final drop detached itself from the edge of the rag. It didn't fall, it stayed.stand, grew, trembled—and suddenly contracted into a finesawtooth line. Spike, spike, spike. He crawledupwardsalong the glass of the lampshade, like a protocol of lies that has decidedagainstThe spikes climbed slowly, wickedly neatly, until they disappeared into the light as if they had signed the ceiling. No one spoke. Theplatemade no noise. And that3–2–3in the stomach acted as if everything was normal.

In the end, the tiles gleamed, clean as a threat. No heroic scent, just spirit, iodine, and that dull warmth when guilt has just had a rag wiped over its mouth. The man on the floor breathed in short, short gasps, his chest under gauze, his bandage taut, enough life to lie later. Conseil held his fingers to his pulse once more—long—long—short—and nodded as if he'd counted a rat. "Enough." There was no more mercy here.

Ned took a half step to the side, leaving the field clear, but not the truth. A razor-thin line remained, left by him: an arrow pointing from the joint directly toward the galley. "Not over it," he said quietly, to no one in particular, to everyone. His boots didn't squeak; they'd talked enough today. The tooth man wiped away the last streaks, obediently in time, his shoulders low, his tongue still. "Open," said Conseil, pointing to the knot on the rag. The bond now obeyed the hand, not the alibi.

Nemo looked like a gallows without a date. He needed nothing, not a word, not a whistle. He stood—and that was enough. His silence had documents. TheplateheldAirnarrow,Lightsharp,Worka tooth underneath, as if to say: Punishment comes in installments, not thunder. I swore his eyes were drier than the hallway. The whiteness of his teeth etched every edge, and the joints looked like lines on a map none of us are allowed to read.

Conseil gathered his stuff and placed three pieces of fiber on the threshold like ugly hosts:open,half,to. “Language remains,” he murmured. Thebrass pinin the clamp now satcorrectand shone as if it had never lied. The lemon scent was

gone. It smelled again of steel, sweat, the kind of order that exists only so that one can contradict it.

No one asked any questions. The crew retreated into their shadows, each with their own little dish under their shirt. One accidentally knockedshort—short—longagainst the railing and pretended to cough.warm holepounded3–2–3in my ribs, not out loud, just signing. I nodded, half-nodded, more to myself, as if that would settle the matter. It never is.

On the frame of the galley door awet semicircleStanding there, thin and clean, the mouth from before, which couldn't decide. It didn't dry. It waited. The tooth man didn't look at him. Ned did. His smile was a cut. "Leave him," he said, "he remembers better than we do." Conseil placed thespirit glassnext to it, and the sooty flakes inside obediently turned3–2–3, tired, reliable like a dog that has seen too much.

Nemo did not raise his hand.platedid it anyway. A single ttk, as polite as a cough in the nave—and all three shifters stoodflush.Air,Light,WorkIn a line, a heartbeat apart, as if they had decided to appear in agreement. The men instinctively raised their heads. Nothing happened, and that was precisely the event.

"Enough," said the boots, not the mouth. We put buckets against the wall, hung up rags—correcttied—and made way as if after a church service that no one believes in. The wounded man got two hands under his shoulders and, groaning, lifted himselfpossibleOn. The glass teeth remained bright, tooth by tooth, as if they wanted to count us in case one was missing.

And then the little, naughty trick of the world, the one that always comes just when you're about to be finished. A final, clean drop collected on the rubber lip of the squeegee. It trembled, round, and polite. It didn't fall. It crawled.upwardsVery slowly, as if the ceiling were thirsty. It slid into the narrow edge between the frame and the wall—a gap that, according to the plan, doesn't exist—anddisappeared. The3–2–3in the stomach knocked afterwards, exactly, with asmallthird blow, high on the ribs, like a signature on a report that no one wants to have written.

The shark with the evil eye

The black was still until it developed an eyelid. First, only a glimmer in a cone, then round, then a shining pan of an eye—cold, a wet mirror without depth, the entire sea in a single spot. It remained. No rushing, no jerking. Itremainedand looked inside as if it had paid admission. The corridor behind me narrowed, tongues dry, the smell of iodine and spirit suddenly too polite for what was outside.

The lamps—our glass teeth—pushed their lips together. The record made its little businesslike ttk:Light −½,Air stable,Workstood still like a hammer stopped. We blinked, as well as steel can blink. The cone became narrower, harder. The eye liked that. It came half an inch closer, not with body—with will. I felt the gaze like a hand on my larynx.

“Since when does something like this stay still?” Ned growled, stepping up to the viewing window, so close that his breath caught in thewet semicirclewhich had been stuck to the frame since the hallway fair. "Go eat, you knife with eyes." His voice was small in the white, but it hit metal. Thewarm holepounding in the side of the ship3–2–3, the third blowsmallas if even the torso were pulling its head in.

Conseil threw soot at the window, not much, just a corner. A dirty wedge, so the world isn't just one color. "Polarize," he murmured, more to his hand than to us. The soot formed a dull triangle in the cone, and in the triangle, the eye looked darker, more real, less magical. "Breathe normally," he hissed, and as if it were a command to physics, he remained.Airexactly where she didn't betray us.

The animal didn't move. It didn't circle. It held us in its gaze like a vice. Somewhere in the belly, a mother slid around a breath, this quietKrkWhen patience wears out threads. I looked for gills, teeth, anything that would explain the rest. There was only this darkness in the middle that swallowed and gave nothing back. The cone flickered for a breath; the plate remained politely silent, as if it knew when not to make a joke.

Ned typedshort—short—longto the pipe. Not loudly, just defiantly. The eye didn't twitch. Or did it? A shadow within it wobbled, as if somewhere far away, someone had grinned with their pupil. "There," Ned snarled, "you hear me." Conseil raised his hand: "Stop." His fingers were positioned over the slat like an emergency brake. Only then did I realize how loud my throat had become.

The cone cut a hard edge across the frame, and in the bright seam I saw the thin film of the hospital, which was trapped in some impossible micro-cleftsidewayscrawled. A hint, not even red, just the smell of it. Nemo stood not two steps away, his glove a finger above the pulpit. He didn't need the click. His silence alone madeWorkgo on standby, invisible, but with a knife handle at your back.

"Some more soot," said Conseil, and I wiped a narrow stripe next to the semicircle with two fingers. The stripe cast a shadow through the eye, as if we'd given it a second eyelid. It stayed. It made us work. Greater than reason, closer than manners.

I put my hand on the bulkhead. Cold. Honest. My stomach held the3–2–3, tired as an accountant. The eye in the cone moved so slowly that time fell asleep over it. One began to believe in one's own mirrors. And then I saw it: In the pane hung our world twice—outside the black pan, inside our shabby white. In the reflection, there wastwoPupils. One outside, oneinside. The one outside remained silent as stone. The one inside blinked—just a whisper, a tiny shadow—not at the same timeA false wink in the glass, one that had no owner. Ned sucked in a sharp breath. Conseil cursed silently. The plate said nothing. The eye remained. And the depth acted as if it had just laughed without showing its teeth.

He circled as if someone had set a compass outside. No wild raid—geometryThree turns, then back to the glass, always the same path, always the same distance, as if it knew where our heart lay. The cone cut stripes out of the black, and each time the eye came so close that I could smell my own breath. In my stomach, the old accountant continued:3–2–3, stubborn, dutiful. My knees preferred to believe in God, my hands in steel.

Nemo lifted the glove by less than a finger.plateobeyed like a trained dog.Lightwent intoshort teeth—short—short—long—open and closed, no strobe, one eyelid. Between bites, it remained narrow, as if we had taught the boat to blink. The cone chopped the circles into small slices; the animal didn't flinch a meter, but its eye developed a white scar.

Conseil stood at an angle in front of the window, counting arcs like screws: "Three—two—three... three again..." His fingers traced the route in the soot, lines and angles that smacked of intent. "He's fixing the edge here." He tapped the frame, exactly where thewet semicirclestill stuck like a forgotten mouth. “The look wantsherelive.” Ned grumbled something unfriendly and stepped closer, so close that his skull briefly split the cone in half.

Ned knockedshort—short—longto the pipe, defiantly, almost politely. The eye jumped a tiny bit, no flight reflex—Beat"So, you're listening to music," he growled, and knocked again. Again that twitch, a barely visible change in the darkness, as if someone in the back of the animal had pushed the control.warm holepounded3–2–3with a thin grin on the third beat, high, cheeky, almost proud.

“Not too much,” hissed Conseil, and with two fingers drew a narrow strip of soot across the pane, vertically, then a second diagonally across it—a poorzebraThe cone broke the reflection of the eye. Nemo gave theLightminimally more teeth, let thelongStanding longer, an eyelid that says: Not now. The animal continued its circle, came back, stayed—but the line of its path tilted upward a finger's breadth, as if someone had knocked the spirit level away.

The corridor smelled of alcohol and nerves. Someone muttered an insult, which immediately faded into the white. I heard screws creeping, that quietKrkwhen patience rubs against threads. The cone felt its own edge, and I noticed how the residue of the blood smell, thin as a thought, remained trapped in the frame.plateheldAirstubborn,Worksilent, as if silence were a tool today.

The shark came so close that you could just make out its cornea, a gray shimmer against the black. Ned raised his fist reflexively, as if you could punch an eye in the teeth. Conseil tapped his knuckles,short—short—longNed breathed the beat, let his hand drop. His eye traced the last arc, stopped, looked—and missed the moment when Nemolong-bite. The cone cut across him, as if someone were wringing the neck of a gaze. The animal took a step backin the ideaback, not in the flesh.

Behind us, the world played its ill-tempered joke. Condensation stood shyly at the bulkhead. Two drops came together, painting a crooked:)as if the steel had a sense of humor. The smile lasted for a breath, then the corner of the mouth melted into aNA second line ran next to it to form aA—crooked, defiant. Both lines separated seamlessly from the metal, slidupwardsunder the slats, as if they had an appointment we didn't know about. Ned saw it and cursed quietly. Conseil pretended to be counting sheets, but his jaw was3–2–3.

The circle outside returned to the window. Nemo let theLightonce againshort—short—longsnap, a final eyelid that doesn't ask. The eye flickered, just a hint, just enough for me to understand: It wasn't a silent stone. It listened. It didn't like it. And yet it remained.

The smell came first. Not strong, not red—just that thin, metallic note that hangs on the tongue like a lie. A residue from the hospital, a whiff, less than a memory, more than enough for such an eye. I didn't see it, I smelled it: like the knife you'd just used to clean. Something shimmered on the frame of the viewing window, almost invisible, a damp line you only see when you know where conscience runs.

"There," said Conseil, barely breathing. His forehead was already against the metal, two fingers on the seam, as if he could feel the tact. "Micro-gap. It smells out." The shark circled halfway and returned home, his gaze like a vice. Ned shrugged. "Let's give him something and get rid of him." A sentence like a curse, sold as a joke. His hand groped toward the bucket, as if there were fish in it and not just our own filth.

Nemo didn't even move his neck. A gloved finger hovered over the pulpit.*Ttk.*Air +1/2, work -1, light narrow. No thunder, just accounting: pressure inward, belly quieter, eyelids like a pin. The cone became sharper, as if cutting through black with a razor blade. I felt the millimeter of air in my teeth, that little cheeky fullness on my tongue—just enough to make the smell linger instead of preaching.

"Nothing's coming out," said his silence. Ned dropped the bucket, dropped his grin, and bit his lip. "Then I'll seal it up," Conseil growled, already on his way: gauze, spirit, the blade that only pretends to be clean. He soaked the cloth, pressed it against the frame, and drew a seam of alcohol and anger, millimeter by millimeter. The spirit glass sat on the floor, the sooty spangles obediently twirling 3-2-3 like a small choir that knows no songs, only duty.

The shark remained. The eye remained. It traced the edge, not curiously, but rather scrutinizing, like an accountant who wants to know where the numbers are intentionally beautiful. The glass teeth above did what good dentist light does: they made shame visible. I saw the wet semicircle tremble on the frame, as if suddenly afraid of being read. The warm hole throbbed three—two—three, the third beat a touch higher, and I swore it was climbing into my ribs so I wouldn't forget that everything here is counted.

"More gauze," said Conseil, and I handed him the strips like communion wafers, ugly but effective. He pressed them into the crack, and the spirit bit the air like a vicious dog. "Seal. No scent, no confession." His hands were steady, his words not. The shark turned another circle, came again, stayed again. His eye was not an animal. It was a tool that could afford to waste time.

Ned couldn't stand the quiet. "We'll blink him to pieces," he hissed, his knuckles already pressing against the tube for a short—short—long time, a reflex like a curse. Conseil snapped at him, harsh as sand: "Not now. Let the push-pull sleep. First pressure, then eyelid." Nemo let the light rest on a narrow notch, a slit so narrow that our cone became a blade. The eye didn't blink. But it noted the new cut: a barely visible twitch, deep inside, where the black half believes and half freezes.

I saw it all at once: the thin, damp line on the frame did what lines don't do. It didn't follow the slope obediently. It was testing. It lay sideways in an invisible groove, perpendicular to the direction of gravity, and hung there for a breath, as if asking for directions. "Dirty capillary," Conseil growled, "or someone's laid a thread here." He drew the blade along the rubber lip, picking out wafer-thin crumbs—soot, salt, guilt. Rubbing alcohol on it. Gauze on it. "Tight."

The shark came closer, an inch of will, not an inch of flesh. His corneal glare became coarse, a grain in his gaze, as if reading the texture of the glass. Ned stood so that his breath rippled along the semicircle, little insults in the condensation. "If he bites, I'll bite back," he murmured, only for his teeth. Conseil gave him an elbow: short—short—long against the arm. His body understood, his head not yet.

The plate held its course. Air remained above, work below, light a narrow meanness. I noticed how the corridors drew in their breath so that nothing could peek out. Behind me, a mother scraped, just a breath, as if she were about to give a polite cough. Nemo didn't look; he had long since paid for the item. His silence was the receipt.

"Still there," Conseil said needlessly. The eye weighed us, found no grams that interested it, and stayed anyway. Perhaps because the depths like to wait until you adjust your own rhythm. The warm hole tapped again 3-2-3, this time cleanly, as if stamping "Done" on the gauze seam. Ned gasped through his teeth, lowered his hands, but only far enough to still grasp.

Then came the small, indecent proof that the world is laughing at us today. On the inner frame stood a drop, round and clear, spirit with a vein of red in it, fine as a thread of guilt. It stood in a place that knows no rest—on the narrow incline. It should have run, down in the honest direction, nice and obedient to the joints. It didn't. It stayed. It grew a fraction. It tensed as if it wanted to jump, decided otherwise—and held on against the incline. A clean, cold no, hanging on the edge like an unblinking eye. The shark watched. We did too.

Nobody said anything, and the 3-2-3 acted as if that were exactly the kind of order one can live with.

“Blink,” no one said, and Nemo did it anyway. Not with his eyes—with steel. His glove hovered over the pulpit, a priest without text, and theplatefollowed like a trained dog who now holds the leash himself.Lightwent intoteeth:short—short—longNo circus, no strobe light—an eyelid that says, "Now you see, now you don't." The cone snapped, released, snapped again. Outside, the eye lingered a fraction too long in every crack of darkness, as if it had forgotten how to see through shadows.

Conseil rubbed the disc in sectors, sooty triangles, quickly and precisely, until inside a crookedzebra"Lines break hunger," he murmured, more to his hands than to us. The soot took away the mirror from his gaze, made it look like a machine eye that knows no mercy. Ned grinned crookedly, dipped two fingers into the dirty corner, and paintedone eyeinside—false, oversized, a pupil that doesn't belong to us. "Stare back," he growled, "if he's going to let us in." The false pupil stood in the soot, black on black, rigid as defiance.

The shark made its circle, came home, stopped.Lightdidshort—short—long. In theshortthe eye did not twitch. InlongIt made the mistake: One breath too close, one notch too far into the cone, so dense that I saw the callus as grain, a fine, living sandpaper. The hull sang immediately—not a howl, a tight, thin tone, as if someone were dragging a violin across our ribs.warm holepoundedthree—two—three, and the third blow climbedhighinto the chest, elegant like a warning with gloves.

"Hold thelonglonger," hissed Conseil. Nemo didn't need the word; the glove remained still, and theplateheld the eyelid open like a scar. The cone became straight, hard, cutting right through the hunger in the eye. Ned raised his fist reflexively, and Conseil rapped his knuckles—short—short—long—Counter-tact against stupidity. "Breath," he said, and I noticed myself hoarding air as if it were black money.

The zebra patches on the glass began to give the eye stripes. It searched for its mirror, found cracks. "Another wedge," Conseil's shoulder commanded, and I smoothed another sooty corner next to thewet semicircleon the frame. The innerfalse eyegot a glimmer of relief; I swore even the real thing outside blinked inside.Lightsnapped again—short—short—long—and the animal put a tiny twist in its route, above, barely more than a thought.

Then it made its advance. Not with force, but withVicinityA slanting thrust, the muzzle remained invisible, but the cone filled with black, and the windshield sang the high song of "too much." Ned didn't yell a word, his forehead almost soldered to the glass, while Conseil opened three valves.by a touchshifted, so small that guilt doesn't look at it. The air got a modesty shirt, the belly fell by half a toothWork, but remained in service.

Andevery time, if the eyelidlongstopped, the indecent trick happened: Theplatetwitched myself. No glove, no command. A faint ttk in the wood of my arms, a breath in the metal:Airbreathedaline more,Lightheld stubbornly,WorkHe made way, as if the usher had learned to anticipate the sermon. Nemo saw it and did nothing. That was precisely his talent.

The shark did not hit the window, but hegrazedus. A shadowtooth skittered through the cone, so close that I was sure I could smell its temperature—cold, new, gloriously memoryless. The visor vibrated, and on its collar lay a thinFiber bundle, small, clean, except that hewrongsat: edge inward, the knot against his hand. "Who baited the light?" Ned growled, his breath painting waves in the semicircle. Conseil didn't even point—he knew.

"Don't tear it off," he simply said, "remember it." He brushed the band with the back of the blade, letting it hang like a bad joke to be read out later. Nemo extended thelong-Bit a second time, and the cone cut the greedy eye once more. The belly hummed,3–2–3, dutifully, and I felt the third blow this timehigherremained as if waiting for our courage.

Ned pulled his lips back. "One more eyelid, boss." His voice wanted to laugh but couldn't find the way.Lightobeyed,short—short—long, and again the little, indecent ttk of theplate, as if it clicked in advance. I didn't see Nemo smile, but his shadow grew more confident. The eye outside began to tremble, not one of fear—a miscalculation.

The cone stoodlongThe sooty zebra stripes shimmered in miniature, thefalse eyein the soot stared harder than we did. The shark pulled its head slightly out of the cone, as if someone had grabbed it by the neck.Workstayed down,Airremained tidy,Lightremained Lid.

And as if that were not enough, the world made its mockery elegant: With everyBlinkof the lamps a shadow fell on theplateas if there was a glove that wasn’t one—and the pushers gave thismildttk,synchronous,by itself. No order, no boot, just steel that had decided to think for itself. Ned stared at the cockpit

as if it had winked at him. Conseil acted as if this were normal and jotted down three barely visible notches in the soot with his thumb:short—short—long.

The eye remained, but the view was no longeroneHe broke on stripes, stumbled on eye shadow, got tangled up onfalse eye. Thewarm holea satisfied3–2–3, and the third blow landedabovelike a period on a sentence we'll only read later. Outside, no fish moved. Inside, no one stood up. We let the depths blink—and the boat blinked back.

He showed his teeth, not as a threat—as a fact. The cone cut across him, and suddenly there was a fan of white, wet, cold, clean as a tool. He came so close to the screen that the metalsang, a subtle, angry sound, like someone dragging a fork across porcelain. The lamp's collar vibrated, the frame creaked. I felt my gums hurt, even though the mouth wasn't mine.

Nemo let him come, almost let him win. His glove hung over the pulpit for a second, and theplateobeyed as if she had practiced:full light,Work +1,Air −½The glass teeth burst open; the cone became bony bright, so hard that it no longer reflected the animal's gaze, butinjuredThe eye twitched, not much, just enough to make you understand: light can bite if you hold it right.

The hull responded with a long, thin hum, and thewarm holepounded3–2–3, the third blowhigh, exactly where courage turns into anger. Ned stood with his forehead almost in the glass, fists against steel, grinning like someone about to tear up a receipt. "Yet," he snarled. Conseil pushed him back a finger's breadth,short—short—longagainst the ankles, his silent, dirty rose garden for reason.

Only then did I see the dirt on our holiness: On the lamp collar lay aFiber bundle, small, clean—wrongTied, edge inward, knot against the hand. Bait on the eyelid. "Who put a leash on the light?" Ned growled, eyes narrowed. Conseil gently ran the knife hilt over it, letting the bundle hang. "Don't touch it."Keep." His voice was math with scars.

Next to the cover, there was abrass pin, blank as an alibi. I only saw it when the light was fully on: theNotch mirrored. Not worn—set. "Provoke flickers," said Conseil, so calmly it sounded like a weather forecast. "Someone wanted the eyelid to twitch when no one was looking." Ned spat dryly. "Then now seeseveryonethere."

The shark was in thelongThe light was getting closer, too close, the corneal flickering as rough as sandpaper. The visor scratched, teeth flashed—a scissor

cut of hunger. Nemo almost bit him—and then tore the sermon upside down: the glove made no way, only a breath, and theplatedid the rest like a good servant who knows his pastor.Lights out.No warning. No countdown. Just black, thick, more honest than any prayer. The seconds grew long and ugly, the cone gone, only the steely breath, and I swore I heard the eye brieflysought.

The animal missed its own advance. It cut into nothingness, slipping past with an idea so close that you could taste the mistake. Nemo let theLightjump again—not full, just aTooth— and the cone hit him sideways: a cut through the intention. The circle outside didn't wobble; itdrifted, offended, an inch of will gone. TheplateheldWorkabove,Airbrief, as if she wanted to punish us for making it work.

There was no longer any wonder flickering on the collar. Conseil pulled the pin out of the clamp, showed the wrong notch, pushed itcorrectback. The click sounded indecently satisfied, like when someone sets a liar's jaw. "Later the bond," he murmured, "now the look." Ned nodded as if he had just saved a tooth. The zebra of soot made hurdles for the eye, thefalse eyein the soot stared back mercilessly.

The shark flashed its fan once more, brushed against the bezel, and the metal echoed a delicate, painful melody. I smelled cold. No smell of water—coldThe cone held, lid inshort—short—long, and eachlonggot this little, indecent ttk from theplate, as if she were answering before asking. Nemo didn't smile. His shadow wassafer.

“Off,” he hissed without a sound, and theGlass teethobeyed once again:Lights out, two strokes3–2–3only on feeling, thenLight uplike a slap in the face. The view outside didn't blink, but helost. A finger's breadth. Enough. Conseil kept the valves in counter-clock position,a touchon,a touchNed drummed the rib with his thumb,short—short—long, his prayer for the filthy.

Then the world played its subtle, obscene trick. On theinsidethe disc, right next to the oldwet semicircle, a tooth appeared. No pressure, no scratch—adry print, clean and cold, as if someone had bitten from the inside without a mouth. A triangle, then another, then a short row of small saw teeth, as precise as music on glass. We stared. The imprint remained—one breath—two—andfadedas if gravity had never known him.

Thewarm holepounded3–2–3, gently, the third blowhighlike a sarcastic amen. Theplatestood still, as if she didn't want to disturb the protocol. Outside, the circle traced a pathfurther out, offended, calculating. Inside, the reversed

waistband hung on the collar like a smile we'll later break someone of. Ned exhaled, counting his fingers as if he'd stolen them back from the glass. Conseil invisibly wrote three small notches in the soot:short—short—long.

"One more eyelid," his shoulder said. Nemo nodded a millimeter, and the cone obeyed. The gaze bounced, the fan disappeared, and what remained was black, acting as if it hadn't planned anything. I didn't believe him. Neither did the boat. And the depths, the old dog, were probably grinning—without teeth, because she knew she didn't need any.

The train came sideways, like a punch from the side. No whirlpool, no drama—just the belly, which suddenly acted as if it wanted to leap starboard out of its own skin. Nemo was faster than our cursing. The glove floated, and theplatestood at attention:Work +2,Air −½,Lightremained hard, like a police stare. A "hard look back" in teeth, not a word. The hull responded with a long, thin hum that chilled the teeth.

Conseil suggestedPush-pullon three valves, so close that you could smell it rather than hear it: oneto breathe on, twoto, threeonA dirty bandage of rustling settled over the crossbar. "Detunen, you bastard," he hissed into the steel, and his belly fell out of the wrong song. Ned understood without school. He stood wide, placed his knuckles on the frame, and drummedshort—short—longNot as a hero, as a hammer. The metal accepted it like a kick in the right direction.

Outside, the eye lost its grip. Not much—a finger's breadthhigher, as if it were looking for a new edge to hold on to. The sooty zebra fields on the disc turned the cone into a staircase;false eyeIn the soot, a black dot continued to stare, impudently calm, pretending to be truth. The animal circled, came back, stopped—and slipped again.aboveout of the curve, each time a little more, as if there were an invisible spirit level above us that we had secretly tilted.

Thewarm holepounded3–2–3, the third blowhigh, and this time it stayed there, just below the breastbone, as if it were holding the ribs until the rest obeyed. I felt likeWorkcrouched in my arms, heavy, honest, andAirIt rested on his tongue like a word that was too short. Ned pulled his lips back, laughing soundlessly. "Go on, you eye—get up where it hurts."

Nemo moved the shutter like an eyelid, diagonally, cleanly.Lightcut the coneacross, letshortopen,shortto,longThe eye did what looks don't like: it had to work. It scraped at stripes that didn't belong to it, jumped over shadows we

had painted. Conseil shifted the valves by another speck of dust. The noise climbed to the edge of the sound called "fear," but remainedunderof dignity.

The lamp collar still had thereversed fiber bundle, small as an excuse. It vibrated in the tone of the visor, a tiny flag indicating who was riding us here. "Later," Ned growled, looking at him as if he were a lip he was saving. Next to the collar, thebrass pin, nowcorrectnotched; he clicked to the beat and acted as if he had never lied.

The eye started, came deeper, let it go, camehigher, stayed. I smelled cold. No water,cold. In thespirit glassthe sooty tinsel turned obediently3–2–3; every time the transverse pull sought our bones, it twitched briefly2–3–2and pushed back, offended, as if he'd learned that dirt can behave. The corridor breathed sparingly; even the screws held back their coughs.

“One more tooth,” said Conseil’s shoulder. Nemo didn’t move the glove.plateobeyed anyway:Workheld up,Airpinched,LightLid remained. The cone was a blade, the look a mistake that had to be learned. I put my hand to the bulkhead. It vibratedcorrect, not friendly.

And then the depths worked their indecent magic.Withoutglove,withoutClick,withoutPulpit: The Conedims. For a whole heartbeat the light became thinner, notout of, onlyfewer, as aBlinkthat came from outside. The glass teeth were silent. Theplateremained motionless, polite as an alibi. But the cone went down, up—a uniqueTwitching, so clean that it tasted intentional.

"Did you—?" Ned broke off, his mouth searching for words that didn't exist here. Conseil stood with his jaw open, not in amazement—inTo count. "No click," he whispered. "No click." Thewarm holereplied3–2–3, the third blowhighlike a nod. Outside, the eye lifted a touchhigherAs if the depths had just winked at us. Inside, our hands remained where they had long been—firmly on the steel, which today could blink without us.

In the end, he didn't do anything great. He simply let go. No fuss, no heroic death in the spotlight—just an eye releasing its grip and thinking back into the depths. The circle widened, the cone caught air, the torso stopped singing like a violin string on our gums. Only then did I realize how long I had clamped my tongue and shoulders.Glass teethremained hard, but they no longer counted. The outside gaze withdrew, an inch of will outward, then another, until from closeness, blackness returned, pretending to be empty.

Awet sickleStanding, thin, sneering, a second corner of his mouth next to the old semicircle. Ned was the first to see him. "Leave him," he said hoarsely, "he remembers better than we do." He took a step back, as if to make room for the glass, in case it still had something to say. Conseil pushed theZebra crossingof soot with the ball of his hand to form a half mist, let thefalse eyestanding like a black hole in the black void. "Later," he muttered. "Evidence remains evidence."

Nemo stood like a bill that was right. No whistle, no sermon. His glove hovered just above theplateas if it were merely the idea of an order, and that was precisely why the pulpit obeyed. A quiet ttk—flush.Air,Light,Workin a line; a single, straight breath of steel. Thewarm holepounded3–2–3, the third blowhigh, as polite as a signed amen. I felt it in my ribs for a heartbeat, and I felt as if the boat had straightened my spine.

Thebrass pinremained on the aperturecorrectnotched, and acted as if he had never lied. Thereversed fiber bundleA small, clean blasphemy still hung from the lamp collar. Ned raised his hand—Conseil caught it with two fingers. "Stay there until we know who the joke belongs to." Ned nodded, teeth shining, lips dry. "Then it's mine." His voice sounded like a promise no one wants to hear.

The crew breathed in a way that has nothing to do with breathing. One sat against the bulkhead as if he had been given permission to do so. One acted as if he had to sort tools; he was sorting fear into smaller pieces. Someone knockedshort—short—longagainst the railing, twice too loudly, then he was ashamed and called it a cough. "Calm down," said Conseil, and his calmness was not. He put thespirit glassagain, right next to thewet sickle, like a candle made of dirt. The sooty flakes inside spun3–2–3, as good as a dog that notices too much.

“Don’t loosen,” no one said, and everyone did it anyway.Workremained one tooth lower,Lightkept us open like files,Airstopped sounding like punishment. The white took out the ramp tone and made us look like people who had survived the bill. Ned briefly rested his forehead against the frame, just a moment to check if steel was still cold. "Are you alive?" he asked the hull. The hull responded with3–2–3. That was enough.

Outside, black remained, and black is an art once you've seen enough. The cone scanned the void like a traffic warden staring at the same parking space for far too long. No more shadow teeth, no more corneal flare, just that old pressure that reminds you that water has no opinion and is still right. We stood there like idiots who missed a joke and pretended it was bad.

"Pack up," Ned grumbled at some point, not loudly, not commandingly—just so hands would know what they were for again. Conseil wiped the soot residue into his pockets, line by line, until only thefalse eyeremained, exactly at eye level, black on black. "Leave it," said Nemo without a mouth. His silence meant: He should see us when he comes back. Thewet semicirclegleamed next door like the memory of a threat that had held up well.

We started to scratch out the routine from the ground: valvesby a touchback,Push-pullquieter, tools on hooks, anger in the pockets.spirit glassstood still like an old-fashioned witness. I stared at the bauble because everything else was too big. He turned, obediently,3–2–3, and I could have sworn that on the third hithobHe made a slight movement, as if he wanted to step out of the circle. I blinked. He stayed. For now.

“Check the fuses,” said Conseil, his fingers tracing braille over the clamps and bolts.brass pinclicked again, satisfied; I felt the click in my tongue. The bundle of fibers vibrated, small, cheeky, exactly in tune with the lamp. "Take it as an invitation," Ned murmured to the ribbon, "we'll come back to this." Nemo didn't move. His patience was frayed.

Then came the kind of silence the world uses to show that it has understood you. No sound from outside, no tailwind from the steel—just the room, which moved half a millimetercorrectfelt. Theconestood, thezebra-Shadow remained, thatfalse eyestill stared like a god made of chalk. I almost believed in peace, the cheap version you get when you're too tired to hate.

The trick came as they always do: small, indecent and precise.spirit glassthe glitter twitched, stopped,3–2–3to turn, and becamePoint. First just dirt, then iris, thenpupil: a clean, black circle in alcohol. No movement, no swirl—just an eye, small as a lie, yet devouring the whole truth. It didn't look up, nor down. It lookedthere—to us. I felt it on my neck. Ned whispered a curse word that was only for his teeth.

"Don't touch it," Conseil said, but his voice lacked conviction. The miniature storm in the glass started up again:3–2–3, only faster, as if someone from outside were conducting electricity through our superstition.pupilstayed in the middle. I swore she was pulling me into the round black, like a drain that has learned its manners. Then the glitter did what everything does these days when it wants to annoy us: Itsolvedfrom the liquid, floated, climbedupwardsup the inner glass wall—for no reason, without physics—and disappeared neatly beneath the rim, as if someone had opened a door up there. The glass was again just spirit.

No one was breathing.warm holepounded3–2–3, the third blowhigh, not friendly, just there. Theplateremained silent, concise, exemplary, like a dog that doesn't need treats. Ned pressed his fingers to the rib,short—short—long—not as a test of courage, as a request for a lie. The steel remained silent. Good thing.

I turned my head toward the window, because that's where you look when the world laughs at you. Black. Only black. And right where the cone thins at the edge, where light no longer has an opinion,one went up. No big drama, no shimmer—asecond eye, far away, just outside our cone. No movement, no circle. It was simplythere. It did what eyes do when they've already seen everything: It waited.

“Move on,” no one said—and it was written everywhere. Clear away, count your breath, save your steps.wet semicircleheld, the fiber bundle vibrated, theplateA ruler remained. The boat pretended it could blink when we were asleep. And somewhere out there, an inch away from Will, a second eye held the cone on a leash and didn't smile.

More rum, more trouble

The barrels came out, as if someone had decided to water the boat themselves. Wood, tin, canisters, cups—everything lay in the aisle like an altar to the kind of god who doesn't save you, but soberly punishes you. The smell was sweet and nasty: rum, spirit, oil, a hint of iodine. Someone sneezed, someone puked, someone laughed too loudly.Glass teethabove, the lips tightened; theplateclicked her polite ttk:Light −½,Air −½,Work stableNo thunder, just the dirty permission to drink now as long as you work faster afterward.

Ned took the tap like a friend who doesn't need names. "Sip or slap," he grinned, and filled cups until his hands were wet. He poured, didn't ask, and anyone who didn't take a drink got splashed on their chest. Conseil kept his distance, arranged the cups, and marked them with fiber bundles:open,half,to. “Those are your rules,” he murmured, “not mine.” Anyone who looked saw that a cup contained a bundlewronghad—edge inward, knot against the hand. I saw it. Ned didn't. Nemo acted as if he'd already checked it off.

The first sips fell, heavy, fat, greedy. One coughed, one spat back, one grinned so broadly that he vomited afterward. The corridor reeked of illness, but the men laughed as if it were courage. Nemo stood at the edge, glove a finger

above the pulpit, like someone who spares himself the trouble of playing clemency.platekept quiet, only thatwarm holepounding in the side of the ship3–2–3, the third blow tired but honest.

I took a cup, just so the room wouldn't say I had eyes that counted. The liquid burned, sweet, then bitter, then like solvent. I held it in my mouth, didn't spit, didn't swallow. The bottom of the cup shone, and then the little, naughty trick happened: A drop of rum detached itself from the rim, didn't fall, but crept.sideways, pushed itself half an inch up the inside wall and hung there like a label that no one had stuck on. Ned laughed, Conseil looked away, Nemo did nothing. The depth now has a taste in our mouths, too.

The second sip wasn't a second sip. It was a kick. First sugar, then soap, then that note you only find in garages. One of the guys—narrow neck, thick intentions—tipped the cup, grinned, and then slumped with a sound as if a curtain had been ripped from his back. Eyes open, knees weak, his mouth said "good," his stomach said "mistake."

"Back with the keg!" barked Ned, but his voice was already too late in the room. Conseil had his nose on the tap, not out of greed, but out of geometry. A whiff on his tongue, and he spat it out as if he'd caught a poison by name. "Cut-off," he growled. "Solvent. Not all—"this.” He tore the bundle of fibers off the cup and held it up.WrongTied. Edge inward, knot against his hand. He stared at the barrel, where the same bundle hung like a smile. "Who's playing pharmacist here?"

Theplatestumbled as if the room itself had drunk the dizziness. A single, nasty ache in his stomach:2–3–2. Wrong timing, a slight gagging sensation in the metal. Ttk. She caught herself, politely, and acted as if nothing had happened:Lightremained narrow,Airmotionless,Workwas still the whip in the back, only without witnesses.warm holepounded3–2–3back, the third blowa touch higher, as if the torso was telling me that it had noticed and was now counting.

“Bring me a cup,” Conseil hissed. He sniffed, swirled, and distributed guilt. Three cups ofopenbound fiber bundles – “drinkable.” Two withhalf– “only for stupidity.” One withwrong– "for enemies." Ned slammed it down on the edge of the slab, and the rum bounced as if insulted. "Who?" he asked into the corridor, not loudly, just so the walls could answer, if they had any honor. No one was stupid enough to open their mouths.

Conseil went over the barrels like one pats a horse before sitting on it. "Smell A, smell B, smell C." He tapped with the handle of his knife:open,half,to– he formed new alliances,correctThere was a chalk mark on a barrel, crooked and indecisive; underneath, the bung was slightly greasy, different from the others. "That's not rum," he said, "that's intentional." Ned grumbled something about teeth and order, but still held back. Nemo stood two steps away, his eyes dry, his glove over the pulpit, as if the click had already occurred before he'd even thought it.

The thin fellow got back up, coughing and laughing at the same time—the laughter of a man who's just learned how cheap he can be. "One more time," he choked, and Ned gave him water. "One more time and you'll drink the tap," he said, kind as a stone.

I set thespirit glasson a box because my hands needed something honest. The sooty tinsel inside, our little judge, did his circling duty.3–2–3.Good, patient. Then, as if he too had felt sick, he did something that was not planned: He stayedacrossstand. Not sinking, not rising.Across, right in the middle of the glass, as if someone had drawn an invisible edge. And yet—I swear—he kept turning.3–2–3.A snotty obedience, against physics, against us. Ned stared, Conseil blinked, Nemo didn't breathe.

"Mark," said Conseil briefly. He tore a strip of rag and tied aopenFederal Government –correct– and wrote an X next to it in soot so that even liars could read it. "This barrel, over my dead body." Ned grinned crookedly. "Make a list. Start with me."

TheGlass teethabove us remained muffled, a dentist who makes you suffer before drilling. Theplatekept herself clean, but I felt her pulse on my tongue. Outside there was only black, pretending to be empty. Inside there were cups that already had stories to tell before anyone drank from them. And somewhere between the barrel and the pulpit, a small piece of air crackled, as if it were smiling that we, too, were now drunk.Push-pullneed to avoid falling.

Conseil lined up the cups as if they were sins to be counted. "Breathe for me," he growled, and his finger tapped the rib.short—short—long"Down, out, back in. No heroic death at the tap." The men lowered their heads, clinging to buckets as if they were railings for idiots. The vomit came out honestly, not pretty, and the corridors briefly smelled of truth.

Nemo didn't make a fuss. A finger above the pulpit, and theplategave a quiet ttk:Light up(Shame),Air +½(so that no one dies before working),Work −1(Forced

break in teeth). TheGlass teethturned stark white, showing every wrinkle, every tremor, like a doctor who shows you your face before telling you that it is yours.warm holepounded3–2–3, the third blowa touch higher, exactly where regret lives when it feels proud of itself.

Ned took two men by the shoulders and pushed them over the bucket. "On command," he hissed. "Swallow, thenshort—short—long. You vomit after thelong"Not before that, you donkey." He tapped the rhythm on their shoulder blades, and their bodies listened to his fingers more than reason. One cried briefly, just for the air. One laughed because he couldn't think of anything better, and then immediately choked it back out.

Conseil went down the row, cups like confessions. "Open" here, "half" there, "closed" away. He tore thewrongBund from the poisonous cup, put aopento,correctSo that even stupidity can understand. "Just water. And don't pray, breathe," he said, and his hands spread gauze around mouths so that teeth wouldn't say anything stupid.

I held thatspirit glassAt knee height, our little judge with the sooty tinsel. He turned3–2–3, stoically, as if he didn't care. When the thin guy gasped for air, the tinsel slipped briefly into2–3–2, acted offendedacross, then back,3–2–3—snotty obedience that even alcohol cannot bend. Screws hummed above us, a thinKrkwhen patience scrapes over threads.

“Lid down,” no voice commanded, and yet Nemo let theLightin theshort—short—longblink, just a hint, just enough so that the faces no longer seemed like excuses. Men now looked like calculations. Conseil nodded contentedly, because mathematics is correct even in the dirt when you step on it. "Again."Short—short—long. Hold. Now." Three backs obeyed, three stomachs surrendered, and the ground told the kind of truth that at least doesn't lie.

I raised my cup, which was neatly marked,opentied, normal. The floor had that oily sheen that reminds you of Christmas and the hospital. Then the trick happened, which I hate because it's polite. A thinRumringcame off the ground—no bubble, no foam—aring, perfect, almost elegant. He neither fell up nor down. He hovered for a breath, as if considering who he belonged to, and began toupwardsto climb. Slowly, neatly, along the inside wall, as if climbing an invisible ladder. At the top, he stuck, just below the edge, a shiny collar that doesn't drip. Ned saw him, blinked, cursed silently. Conseil pretended to be just counting bars. Theplateremained silent, that3–2–3remained, and I realized: Even a cup now has manners that are against us.

The argument sought out the engine room because noise tastes better there. "Real rum!" one yelled, "not the white spirit from the warehouse!" Two others held him as if holding their own trembling. The pump for the transfer stood there like an invitation: levers, pressure gauges, clamps, a viewing window in which bubbles remained cheerful. It smelled of oil, hot metal, and the sweet residue from the barrels. The room was too small for us and our truths.

Nemo positioned himself in such a way that he could neither be avoided nor misunderstood. The glove hovered just above the pulpit, and theplatestraightened his back:Work +1,Air −½,Lightstayed on dentist – mercilessly honest.warm holepounded3–2–3, the third blowhighlike a grip on the neck. Ned grinned crookedly, placed his hands on the rib and tappedshort—short—longagainst the steel, his little prayer that sounds like fists.

"Close the cock, then the lever," Conseil growled, "not the other way around." The enraged man hissed something about manliness and still pulled the lever first, because stupidity has the same fingers as courage. The peephole made beads that became too fast; the pressure gauge grew a needle's width into a lie. "Back!" Conseil was already past him, blade on the belt, eyes on the error. "There." He pointed not at the man, not at the cock—at the clamp of the aperture. Abrass pin, blank as an alibi,Notch mirrored. Not old –set. Exactly so thatFlickeroccurs when you need pressure.

Ned grabbed two shoulders at once, shoving the men to the railing like scoundrels who've gotten too loud. "Shut up and keep your hand still." One tried to swing. Ned blocked with his forearm, short, dry, letting him kiss the pump wall. No heroic dance—order with knuckles. The room quieted down because metal has the final say here.

Conseil pulled the pena touch, only until he sang, turned him, put himcorrectThe click was obscenely satisfying, like a joint that, for God's sake, has snapped back into place. "Again," he said, this time politely: "Close the tap. Now lever." The guy did as he was told and fell silent, filled with shame that stank even here. The bubbles in the peephole calmed down, becoming honest, rounded shoulders. The pressure gauge dropped the lie.

Theplatekept the pressure on us:Workabove like a knee in the back,Airshorter, so that no one starts singing.3–2–3knocked us together; the third blow remainedhighand remembered who's in charge here. I smelled the pump, the rum, the anger—three perfumes that hate each other. Ned wiped blood from

his lip with the back of his hand, looking at the mirror-notching pen as if it now belonged to him. "Whoever did it," he said quietly, "has teeth I'll count."

"Check the filter," Conseil murmured, already on the second clamp. He stroked the seat, found a fine film, not oil –IntentionA scrap of fiber hung on the edge, small as a sin,wrongknotted. He let himhang"Proof." Ned nodded, his fingers itching, but he didn't touch it. Nemo didn't need a sound; his silence turned the entire wall into eyes.

We set the lever onOut ofNed held him down, as if to help the word die. Conseil slowly wound back, in order, the only liturgy that counts here. The men breathed more shallowly because air was scarce and pride was cheaper.Glass teethdidn't flicker; they just froze us.

And the pump, the bastard, did its trick. Lever long ago down, tap closed, every gesture completed – it ranone baron. A final, cheeky punch through the line, a thin whump in the stomach that felt like a subsequent mockery.warm holereplied3–2–3, the third blowhigh, as if the torso were signing the joke. Then silence. No flickering. Just us, the clicking of thecorrectThe pen was in place, and the taste of work was on his tongue. Ned released the lever, slowly, as if he had just pulled a tooth.

He took the cup not like a thirsty man, but like a customs officer. Open covenant,correctbound, neatly marked. He lifted it, held it against the white of theGlass teeth, didn't tip it. A man who doesn't drink and still serves. His eyes wandered down the row, not counting the cups—People"Those who fall will work closer to the edge tomorrow," said his silence. The glove hovered a finger above the pulpit. Ttk. Theplateobeyed:Light full—Humiliation in White;Air −½—Tongues on a diet;Work +1—Force as punishment.

The faces became bills. Every stain, every bad habit stood in the light like an interrogation record. One grinned too broadly, already done for. One held his gaze until he had to blink and his courage ran down his throat. Ned redistributed, slowly, thoroughly—not rum,Roll"You stand here," said his finger, "you there." No excuses. Conseil casually marked the taps and barrels,open/half/closed, and left the poisoned box with a soot X standing there like a confession.

"Drink," no one said, and that's exactly why someone raised the cup too early. He did it with the hand that had previously been lying at the pump. Nemo didn't look, but theplateunderstood on my own what command means: ttk.WorkAnother half a tooth up. The murmuring in the room died down; the

arms grew heavier than the guilt. The man drank, grinned, held, swayed. Ned placed a bucket in front of his knee like a present with concrete in the bottom. "Breatheshort—short—longhe growled, and the body obeyed out of fear, not faith.

Thewarm holepounded3–2–3, this timehighIn the third, the blow sat under my sternum like a stamp. I knew: He's writing. Not the sea, not us—the boatConseil heard it too; his fingers counted valves without turning them. "Let it run," he murmured towards the pulpit, "untilWorkgets tired himself." Nemo remained a statue. His silence gave us shoulders big enough for two men and no god.

"One more round," Ned grinned, wickedly friendly, and handed out the cups like court rulings. Whoever was clearly marked got water. Whoever needed it, rum. Whoever lied got both, one after the other, the order that shames. I saw the hands: calluses, furrows, little saints covered in dirt. A few grabbed the wrong rims—greed has the same hand as hunger.Glass teethmade the white on our nails flash as if we were all already corpses, just badly made up.

Nemo raised the cup once more, just beneath the slat. The alcohol glistened, and on the inside of the bulkhead, condensation stood, as fine as a skin. First mist, then drops, then two drops searching for each other. They were doing what they do here all the time, and what no one outside would believe: They were writing clearly.NA line, crooked, defiant. Next to it grew aA, born wrong,mirror-invertedand yet legible like a threat. No one said it. The room acted as if it were none of its business.

Theplatekept the pressure at throat level.Lightremained interrogation,Airremained bill,WorkWhip remained at his back. The man with the wrong timing didn't fall—hecrouched. That's worse. Ned put his hand on his neck, not gently, justcorrect, and made him spit his honor into the bucket. Conseil put water in his mouth as if it were a screw being tightened to stop it rattling.

I stood so that I could see both: the cup in Nemo's hand and the two letters on the bulkhead. The cup remained untouched; the man holding it drankTo countThe letters peeled away—cleanly, brazenly—from the cold skin. They slidupwardsunder the slats, like appointments that we cannot get because we are already sentenced.3–2–3in the stomach delivered the third blowhighand let him stand there for a breath. I realized that no one wins here: not greed, not order, not courage. Only the machine. And it keeps its cups empty until it's sure we've understood who we belong to.

The spark came from nowhere and everywhere. A boot slipped, a buckle kissed steel, and the rag who had been drinking spirits took it personally. First a tenderf, then a flame, small, cheeky, orange like a lie in a child's shirt. It licked at the joint between the pump and the wall, exactly where thereversed fiber bundleas proof. "No!" roared three voices simultaneously, too late for the principle.

Ned threw the bucket, Conseil was faster: He smothered it with gauze,short—short—longpressed onto the fire as if rhythm were fire-fighting foam. The flame hissed in offense, crawledsidewaysup at the metal, sought air, found pride. Theplatemade ttk with contempt:Lights out–a blowJust a black eyelid over everything. In the hole without white, you could hear our teeth. Outside, the black stirred like an animal checking its cage when the light finally blinks. Ttk.Light up– a slap in the face. The flame froze, lost courage, died under Conseil's gauze, which stank of alcohol andYes.

"Heroes die from rags," Conseil growled, laying the burnt cloth on the edge like a document of evidence. Then someone stumbled into the picture—the guy with the guilty face who never quite finishes. He grabbed a fresh rag, dipped it in water, and madelargeandincorrect: A train over thearrowsthat we had left behind—the narrow, shiny trail leading to the box, the small notch on the pump, the drop on the frame that said "this way." One swipe, and history was almost gone.

Ned was already standing there. A boot on the rag,hard"Don't." His foot drew a circle for the idiot that he was not allowed to leave. "You wipe when I say, and you leave what will save us later." He bent down, pushed the edge of the solearrowsFree again: a wet line to the box, a semicircle to the bell, a nudge of the nose against the frame. "That's how you spell truth, you brainless hero." The guy nodded, his eyes wide, his hands empty.

Nemo didn't need a sermon. His glove hung just above the pulpit, and theplatekept us short:Airremained close,Workwas a tooth high,Lightremained firm. Thewarm holepounded3–2–3, the third blowhighlike a finger to his lips. "Quiet," that was what he said. Conseil tapped the frame,short—short—long, put the pump inPush-pull: Valve oneto breath, twoon, threetoThe room was filled with noise; the burning smell disappeared, the rum remained, and so did the anger.

I smelled hair – charred – and guilt – fresh. The false hero raised his eyes and finally saw what he had almost killed: theinverted waistbandon the lamp collar, thecorrectnotch on thebrass pin, the wet line that served as an arrow. "I just

wanted..." - "You wanted it too soon," Ned cut him off. "Too soon is treason in your Sunday best." The man nodded, as if he were memorizing the phrase.

TheGlass teethAbove us remained silent, no flickering, only that blank white that lists you. The flame was dead, but its spirit still hung warm in the air. Nemo lowered the glove a touch, not enough for a click; theplateunderstood it anyway:Lighteven a tooth harder,Airagainnormal,Workstayed high – penalty in installments. Outside, the black acted as if it had only stretched, and I swore, somewhere just outside the conesoughtsomething off the wall after our mistakes.

"Keep breathing," Conseil said, his voice filled with sweat. He lifted the burnt rag with two fingers, as if it were a mouse, and placed it next to thespirit glassThe sooty flakes inside spun3–2–3, good, insulted. Ned tied the idiot's ragcorrect:open, edge outwards. "Now you wipe—hereNot." He pointed to the arrows. "They stay so tomorrow knows who to punch in the face."

And while no one wanted to look away and everyone did, the world cast its little, obscene spell. In the cone of the lamp, on the glass bell itself, a thinsawtooth lineup – not hot, not bright, just there. Spike next to spike, fine as counted lies. She didn't run down. She ranupwardsOne spike climbed the next, the line climbed the bell as if the light had acquired a ridge on which truth strikes its knees. No one moved.plateremained silent. The3–2–3stayed. And the room suddenly smelled like class again.

In the end, the corridor no longer smelled of rebellion, but of receipt. The fire was dead, the idiot held thecorrecttied rag like a satchel, Ned let thearrowsstanding, pointing to the box, the clamp, the frame. Men breathed again like people who will need shoulders tomorrow.Glass teethAbove remained cold, sober, the white of an interrogation that decided to remain polite.

Conseil arranged things like a crime scene technician: three fiber strips on the threshold,open,half,to– small hosts for the stupid. Next to the pump was the soot X, another one by the barrel, and a third on the tap. "So we don't forget it in our intoxication," said his neck. Thebrass pinon the panel was nowcorrect; he shone as if he had never lied. Thereversed fiber bundlestuck to the lamp collar, a pure blasphemy that would later get a name.

Nemo didn't preach. He positioned himself so that the room understood who was doing the math. The glove stoodabovethe pulpit, notonher, and yet the traffickers obeyed. A single "ttk," as polite as a cough in a church.Work −½,Air

normal,Light strict. Punishment in installments, mercy in millimeters.warm holepounded3–2–3, the third blowhigh, remained for a moment under my ribs as if he intended to sign me.

"Put it away, don't hide it," Ned growled, pushing the fake hero to the edge of the arrows as if it were a cage of dampness. He drew a small semicircle in the track with the toe of his boot, pretending to smile—a mouth that will speak later. "Tomorrow we'll go for the guts of this box." The man nodded, as if hearing his judgment from another mouth.

The barrels moved back into their hole, the metal returned to where it only sounds when called. One sorted tools, as if fear could be sorted by size. One washed his face with water that smelled of rum, and afterward, he looked like a confession. Conseil wrapped the burned rag in gauze and laid it next to thespirit glasslike evidence that must not be burned. The sooty flakes inside spun3–2–3and suddenly had a touch of well-behaved defiance.

Outside, there was only black. But black is a job, if you look at it long enough. The cone scanned the silence like a traffic warden who reads every sign twice. And just when I thought that for once we belonged to ourselves, a shadow twitched at the edge of the light. No flash of teeth, no finboard—just amomentof it, a round nothingness that pretended to hold us on a leash called patience. "See it?" someone whispered behind me. "No," I said, "and that's exactly what I mean."

Theplateremained a ruler that no one questioned.Lightkept their faces open,Airdidn't hurt anymore,Workstood at a height that silences men. Ned typedshort—short—longagainst the frame, quietly, to himself. The steel accepted it like a joke it already knew. Nemo movednothing, and the room still obeyed: boots away, barrels closed, cups empty, ragscorrectbound.

“Sleep in shifts,” said Conseil, “and those who dream count out loud.” No one laughed. He placed thespirit glassexactly so that thewet trackon the frame and thesemicirclein the light could see it. The sooty flakes spun obediently. Once, twice—and then it stoppedPoint. No circle, no mood. An eye, small as a lie, that nevertheless devours the entire truth. I blinked. He stayed.

The trick came so quietly that even Schuld almost missed it. The three sliders gave amildttk—one by one—and stoodflush, without hand, without command, so clean that even cynicism became polite. In the same breath,spirit glassa perfect, thin circle of streaks—not on the floor,aboveon the inside wall. He

broke free, climbedupwardsinto the edge under the rim and disappeared as if someone had a door there for little truths.

Nobody said anything.3–2–3knockedhighone last time and then lay down as if it were detention. Ned pressed his lips together as if he were holding down an answer that would only make sense with his fists. Nemo didn't look and still hit everything. Conseil smoothed the host fibers,open,half,toas if he were ordering prayers for tomorrow.

We parted like people who know that the day is not over just because the lamp pretends to be. The corridor remained bright and lean.reversed fiber bundleon the lamp collar vibrated in the residual tone of the bezel, mini spot in textile. Thebrass pinremained silent,correctnotched, as if he wanted to lie and could no longer. And outside, just behind the cone,somethingholding his breath, politely like a family friend who has the spare key.

Fall into darkness

The port acted as if it were letting us go out of politeness, as if it suddenly had a soft side that reeked of farewell. But everyone knows that politeness is just a decent cloak for hunger. Beneath the cloak, teeth scrape. The ropes groaned, long and old, like backs in the morning after a night on the ground. The bollards were silent, fat, tired priests who had heard every confession a thousand times. Above it all, the clicking of the searchlights, cold and pedantic, a toothache in the air that seems never to end. The officer stood amidships, playing statue with his pulse.

He acted as if his words were nails and we were the wood they belonged in. Cast off, he said, and the siren ripped the punch line from his mouth, roaring into the wet skin of the bay until the gulls looked like improperly ironed letters. We glided, awkwardly at first, then more willingly, out of the city's slippery grip. The film on the water shimmered, bad-tempered, oily like a lie left in the sun too long. Conseil beside me, the accountant of disasters, felt his fingers as if counting bandages he hadn't even applied yet. He drummed a small heart onto the canvas roll, a heart no one had ordered.

Ned Land wiped the harpoon, not lovingly, but as one cleans a dog's mouth before letting it off the leash. His hands spoke no poetry, only craftsmanship, a dull, honest song that resonated with resin and old curses. A young sailor clutched the compass as if trying to teach the thing manners; the needle had

other plans, pointing sometimes to the sky, sometimes to his boots, and neither was north. Behind the ribs of the ship ran a low drone, patient, steady, like a debtor who knows you'll never leave.

I smelled metal in the wind. Not the good-natured iron of hooks and chains. Colder stuff, stuff with no memory. The wind brought with it the breath of the descent, that thin mixture of old rope, young sweat, and a hope best handled with gloves. The water, usually a juggler, shining and cooing, was serious today. It stared. That's what it looked like: a smooth face without eyes, but it stared. In the distance, masts rattled as if bones were talking to each other.

I felt my shoulders searching for the collar, how the body beneath me wanted to shrink, and I let it. It was a time when people rely on what they hate: orders, routine, knots that hold in the dark. The city became a box with distant windows, and we a match someone held to the wind for too long. The lenses continued to snap, cold tongues licking at the water, disgusted each time. We fell from the world of taillights into the world of sounds that have no names, only directions, and the ship was suddenly an animal that remembered us.

The searchlights did their neat work, too neat to be true. They cut bright streaks into the graying canvas of the bay, as if in a hurry to repair the night. The beam swept over the water, finding nets, poles sticking out of the silt like bad thoughts, two gulls that looked like decisions made far too soon, and then suddenly nothing, just the depths blinking. "Right ahead," one yelled, and then another yelled that "right" means something different here, and the officer stopped yelling altogether because he was sick of the words.

The ship breathed heavily, as if it had been smoking for years and only today allowed itself to cough. I leaned over the railing. The sea grinned at me, its skin smooth and expressionless, as if it refused ever to show a face. No back, no fin, no honest hump. Just the nauseating feeling of being watched by something that doesn't need a neck to turn its head. Ned cocked the harpoon, resting the shaft on his shoulder as if the wood were natural to him. No speeches, no circus. Just craftsmanship. Seven days, he muttered, I don't need seven, and his tone wasn't a promise, more a weather forecast, like rain that falls when it wants to. Conseil made that little, disrespectful noise with which he pigeonholes all gods and officers. Someone on the forecastle shouted hurried orders through the air, the words clashed, became blunt, and fell back to the deck like lead pellets. One lamp circled, a second answered, both drawing lines that were too clean for this soup, too orderly for a water that lives on stories.

And there it was again, invisible, more like a pain familiar from the weather: something was passing beneath us. No heaving, no blowing, just a floating thought. The deck vibrated, barely, but honestly, and my stomach acted as if it recognized the movement from before. A man at the winch held his breath, as if he could use it to blackmail the sea. Someone laughed too loudly, a laugh that pinches when it hits your ribs.

I heard the thrumming in the planks, a foreign pulse beneath our own, and I noticed my hands automatically searching for the railing, the old banister made of splinters and insults. "Hold your position," someone shouted, as if the sentence were a spell. I thought of the one-eyed man in the harbor bar, his chalk circles and his finger-waving in the air, all the false walls in his stories, and hated myself for agreeing with him today. The night sucked in my stomach. The sea tensed my muscles. And somewhere far below us, something was laying its back down into the depths, so calm it was outrageous.

The impact came without drama. No thunder, no drumbeat, no spectacle for the newspapers. Just a short, polite nudge, like a waiter pushing you out of the way because something important is about to happen. The ship clenched, wood creaked, a few teeth in a few mouths ground along, and the world tilted half a meter away from the idea we had of it.

Crates slipped, ropes shot through shoes like offended snakes, a crate fell, shattered, and oil spilled out as if it had been practicing in the dark to shine beautifully right now. "Whale," someone shouted, but the scream fell into the water before it could even finish, becoming a thought that bubbled, and then nothing at all. The beam of a lamp slanted diagonally beneath the surface, a knife that changes its mind.

The tearing came surgically, coldly, an invisible hand zipping open the ship's belly, not out of hatred, out of interest. Back, the officer roared, his voice slipping on the wet night. Ned stood with his legs apart, harpoon at his hip, a man who wants to spit in the sea's face, no matter how many teeth it has. Conseil grabbed my sleeve, missed, hit, missed again, three little promises broken by the water. The railing was suddenly no longer where it belonged. The cold hand of the sea grabbed my jacket, pulled me down, not brutally, just definitively, like a bouncer with a sense of humor. Above me, shoes, curses, wood, and orders roared in confusion; below me was silence, that dreadful silence that sounds as if someone had wrapped the heart of the world in cotton wool. The salt bit, old and without mercy, filling my mouth, my nose, my head, as if it wanted to wash out everything that smelled of human beings.

I rowed with arms that suddenly felt like lead. A rope brushed against my leg, first pretending to help, then wrapping itself around my boot as if offended. I kicked, encountering nothing but cold. The roar was back, closer now, a beat that didn't belong to us but knew us, a metronome for a music we were just learning. I looked up once more. A thread of light hung there, thin as an excuse. Men toppled diagonally across the deck, crates became the furniture of a bad idea, and in the middle of it all, something moved with purpose.

The water clung to me like a believer. I thought of all the times I've told the sea stories to keep it amused, and realized how much it hates stories that aren't paid for with blood. Then everything grew darker, not because the lights went out, but because my mind decided to visit a different theater, one without chairs, only with traps.

I swallowed more salt, my stomach rolled, my eyes churned, and somewhere deep in the back of my mind, a memory switched on a lamp: a metal silhouette, the shadow of a skinless animal. The sea pulled the boots off my feet, measuring me as if I were a suit designed to fit it. I held my breath, held it tight like a bird that hates me, and felt the hatred escaping me. The roar remained. The calm remained. And I became lighter because the world became heavier.

There's a moment when you realize that air is nothing but a pleasant whim. It comes without fanfare. It comes when your lungs lock the door and the key is left in the anteroom. The water was everywhere, and everywhere it had the same character: matter-of-fact, thorough, with a slight tendency toward insult. I floated still for a heartbeat, then my body began to recite that stupid automatism that evolution boasts about: kicking, rowing, thrashing, hoping a little longer. Above me, shreds of light tumbled, thin as the nerves of an accountant stealing for the first time. Something large passed by, just a shadow, but a shadow with manners. Not a twitch, not a prance. Intentional. I turned in the direction where my fear was thickest. A loud nothingness pressed on my ears, that vacuum in which thoughts suddenly become too loud.

I heard them trying to save me: Swim to the light, swim to the voice, swim to anything that sounds human. But down there, all humans sounded the same, like coins in the mouth of a well. A rope shot beside me, a friendly snake this time. I grabbed at it and narrowly missed. The second grab was a bad joke. I kicked, feeling the resistance of the water like a weary bailiff explaining that you won't get anything today that's yours to keep. Then I hit something hard, angular, smooth.

A metal body sliced past me as if I were a naughty seaweed. The thing's skin felt as if it had never learned to be soft. I ran my fingers over it, a reflex as stupid as a love letter in the rain. An old saying rose up in me, one of those you shout across tables after you've had too much to drink: Everything that really hits us comes without faces. The roar was very close now, not a heartbeat, more like a breath, a rhythm that wasn't ashamed. I clung to a protrusion, maybe a seam, maybe a crease, anything that promised to carry me for a moment.

My lungs began to yelp. Air now, they screamed, and the water grinned. I pushed, pulled, slid, pushed again. Above me, the deck of the world danced, somewhere metal screeched, the wail of a wind seeking confession. Another body brushed against me. A human. I saw the whites of the eyes, which immediately turned gray. Conseil, I thought, but names are more important up above than down below. I reached for my sleeve, it was gone before I decided to hold it. So, it was me again. Me and this cold metal beast.

I pressed my chest against the smooth surface as if whispering a secret into its ear. The roar answered, and in the response there was no hostility, only work. It was the sound of something doing what it was built for. We're tearing past each other, I thought, and today one of us is doing well. The light above me was getting bigger, or I was getting smaller; in the water, that's an argument neither wins. I made another thrust, another, and as my fingers sliced upward, they suddenly encountered roughness, wood, the honest grime of deck planks.

I clung to it, no hero, just a wet animal cheating its way onto dry land. Someone screamed my name, it sounded like everyone else's, and suddenly there were hands again that weren't cold. They grabbed, they tugged, they cursed, and the water let go, not willingly, but with the reluctance of a waiter leaving work. I spat, coughed, the world tilted back into its frame. Over the stern I saw the sea, smooth as a skilled con man. And below, just a breath away, the movement of something that had chosen us. I lay there, spat out, and the drone played on as if it had its own clock.

The deck was a brothel of pain and noise. The men wheezed, coughed, spat salt and gum, and the officer acted like he had the situation, even though the situation had already had him by the balls. "Pumps on!" he yelled, and the pumps responded with a noise like a cough that should have been in bed long ago. One sailor held his shoulder as if it were an offended parrot. Another searched for his boot, but instead found a colleague's vomit.

The lamplight wavered, as unreliable as good intentions, and the night was a vast, ill-tempered carpet the sea was trying to sweep us under. Ned Land stood there, legs apart, harpoon at his hip, looking as if he were begging God himself for a fight behind the shed. "One more time, that bastard shows himself," he growled, "and I'll nail the truth to his back." Conseil pressed a piece of canvas to my forehead. "You're bleeding, Monsieur." "I'm sweating," I said, and he made that little noise that says: you lie badly, but I'll leave you your dignity.

Beneath us, that roar vibrated again, quiet, industrious, as if there were a factory down there, minting our fears into coins. "All hands astern!" roared the officer, "all clear for maneuver!" Nothing was clear. The lines were stung, the blocks bent, the men tired, and the sea licked us across the planks like a dog deciding which bones to keep. I felt anger creeping warmly into my fingers. Not the subtle, clean anger of poems.

The dirty one. The one of nights and bars and bills no one wants to pay. "Fucking shit," I said to the air that was still there, "show your face." And the sea, that big, smooth liar, grinned. Somewhere wood broke, not like a branch, more like a promise. The bow light flickered, died, came again, a drunk on his way home. Two men carried the third, and the third complained that he could walk himself, until he realized his leg disagreed. The officer ran his hand through his hair as if he might find an idea in it, and found only sweat. "Hold the line!" he yelled, and the line laughed, became a heap, became a question no one had the strength to answer. I stepped to the railing, tasted salt and blood and anger. Down there, my stomach said, lives something that doesn't ask. And then came the second jolt.

He came sideways, damned politely, like a waiter punching you in the back because the place is closing. The ship screamed this time. Not us, the ship. A long, deep sound, as if someone had stroked its spine and then broken it. We tipped over. Crates became cannonballs, men bad ideas no one wanted to have. I flew, not far, but far enough to kiss the railing and wonder if we used to have a thing. Then there was water again, that faceless asshole, everywhere, cold, thorough, as if it were on a time clock.

I dove, coughed, cursed in bubbles, and saw—there it was, as damned clear as an insult in the morning light: no whale. No living back breathing. A skin of metal, smooth and unrepentant, passing us like a sinful cathedral. An iron bastard so silent you'd want to buy him a suit to tell him how much you hated him. "You bastard!" Ned yelled from somewhere beside me, and he sounded like he was slapping an old friend. I paddled, my body doing the bad dance of

the drowning, lungs yelping, and the roar was close now, so close it was brushing my ribcage out.

The thing rose, just a touch, enough to build a wet, shimmering stage on its back. I drifted against it, kicking my knees, clawing my fingers at a seam, an edge, whatever, the metal slid as if it had soap at its heart, but there—stop. I hung on it like a sack of shame. Ned surfaced, harpoon still gripped, a fool and a saint. "Up!" I gasped. "Up that iron shit-pike!" He cursed on principle, then did it. Conseil surfaced like a letter that finally arrives, pale and determined.

The three of us slapped the back of this monster, like three bad thoughts that won't go away. The thing vibrated, and the vibration ran through my arms, as if trying to convince me I was in the wrong place. I was absolutely right. "Strike!" Ned yelled, thrashing the shaft against my skin. "Open up, you precious bastard! Show me your waiters!" I did as he did, banging, cursing, spitting, while the sea tried to sweep us back under with long, cold tongues.

There it sounded, deep inside: another noise, not a roar, more like a clearing of the throat. Something heard us. Something moved. A round outline grew out of the smooth surface, a lid with teeth made of screws. "Holy confusion," said Conseil. "Holy shit," I said. And the lid popped off.

The light that crept out wasn't friendly. A light that has lived in cellars for too long. Yellowish, offended. Behind it, shadows of people, not sailors, not fish—men with faces that say: We don't talk because talking wastes time. One had a gun that looked like a grumpy umbrella. Another wore a cap that knew no port. They grabbed us without fuss. No "welcome," no "please," just hands, firm, routine, as if we were boxes with stupid questions.

Ned snarled and swung, but the gun made a soft, polite "pfft," and he dropped to his knees, not defeated, more surprised that silence could also strike. "Fair enough," I muttered, "we're the kind of guests who mess up the carpet." Conseil raised his hands as if he were explaining a bill. I smelled oil, metal, a bit of electricity, and beneath it the breath of people who spend a long time talking to machines. Inside was a corridor, clean as a cut. Rivets gleamed as if they'd just heard a sermon. The roar became the heartbeat of an animal that never sleeps. They pulled us in, the hatch closed, and the sea stayed outside like a bad ex.

The floor bounced, a breath, as if the thing were walking on heavy breath. We were pushed to the right, then left, then through a door that looked like a tight-lipped mouth. A room, sparse and expensive. A metal bench, two hooks, a

feeling like probation. One of the men pointed to the bench: "Sit." His voice was rough and short, leaving no room for grammar. Ned growled, but sat down anyway, his hands making fists that didn't know where to begin. Conseil took a counting breath. I let myself fall, heavy, a wet sack of godlessness. The man with the umbrella nodded, as if he'd won a bet, and disappeared.

The door closed with a click, so small it hurt. It grew quieter. Not quiet—quieter. The roar remained, deeper now, warmer, as if the thing had taken us into its belly and decided to digest us. "Not a whale," I said, because someone had to say it. "A damn house on wheels. A steel fish with an address." "And we're the post office," Conseil said. Ned spat on the floor, narrowly missed, cursed tenderly. The light breathed. I heard water scraping away somewhere, as if an entire ocean were frowning outside. Then footsteps. Slowly. Deliberately.

The sound of shoes that know they have the right to refrain from entering anywhere. A second door, one we hadn't seen yet, pretended to be a wall, but was no longer. It opened, silently. And there he stood—no God, no devil, just a man who had read enough brochures about both to no longer be interested. His eyes cool, his beard a decision. He looked at us as if we were a riddle he had posed to himself in order to save the evening. "Welcome," he said, so calmly that I felt cold, "in the belly you wanted to fall into." And the darkness drew closer, not because it was getting darker, but because we were now inside.

Lost between wrecks and madness

I came to like a cheap alarm clock: too late, too loud, and no one thanked me. Metal under my back, metallic air in my lungs, metallic thoughts in my skull. The floor vibrated to a rhythm you learn to hate if you hear it too often. 3-2-3. The boat breathed, and the breathing sounded like someone standing next to you with crossed arms, waiting for you to apologize. My tongue tasted of battery and insulted electricity. An oily film in my throat. A screw somewhere sang a thin, broken note. Ned cursed into the corner as if he were slapping the shadow. Conseil counted quietly, a kind of prayer that knows only numbers. My jacket clung to me like a poor alibi.

The door slid open without a sound, and there he stood. No drama, no theatrics. A man who had learned to fold the world in with a glance. Nemo. His eyes cold as sinks. His beard a decision. Behind him, two of his silent executioners in their work clothes. "Rules," he said, as if they were old scores. "No questions I don't ask. No doors you open. No heroes." He let it hang for us

to smell. "You're guests." He paused for a moment, as long as a knife. "Muzzled." Ned set his chin in resistance. "A damn muzzle doesn't fit me." Nemo looked at him as if a nail had complained about being hammered. "Then wear it properly." He turned away as if the chapter were settled. "Stand up." The word fell from the table like a tool. We stood.

The corridor was a gut of steel, rivets like stumps of teeth that never had a tooth fairy. The floor cushioned a breath, as if the thing were walking on thick breath. Condensation ran down bulkheads, finding the old paths all drops find when a machine dreams the same dream long enough. We walked 3-2-3 because the floor forced us to. Light flat, yellowish, offended. Valves clicked somewhere, invisible fingers on invisible throats. Nemo led the way as if he owned the clock in our bones. His men walked like screws that know where they belong. Ned muttered, "I'll rip a hatch frame out of your stomach, you old steel fish." Conseil breathed, "Please not now," and made lines in his head as he walked. I let my hand slide over an edge. Smooth. Cold. The boat pretended I was air.

We entered the salon, and if you really want to play church – yes: a chapel made of glass. A room that cranes your neck to stare out at the world. The panes stood there like artificial teeth. Behind them: black with memory. Phosphorescent streaks, as if someone had poured neon into the night. And then, like hands in an x-ray, they appeared: keels, masts, ribs. A graveyard of ships, dense as a poor excuse. Mud rose in lazy shreds, as if the bottom were dreaming. A bell hung crooked in a seaweed coffin, rusted but proud, like an old boxer who still believes in the bell. A piece of the ship's side, rolled up like a burnt letter. A child's shoe. No romance, just an inventory of stupidity. The sharks made their circling patrols, bouncers with questions of taste. When one flashed, you saw logic in the eye for a moment, then nothing again. Pressure pressed down. The glass hummed, a subtle sound that hammered you between the eyes.

"Bank, archive, courtroom," said Nemo, and each of the three concepts sat in its own chair. "We take what's ours and leave the lies alone." Ned laughed dryly. "You're entitled, you mean." Nemo acknowledged him with as much attention as a man gives a fly at a window. "Record on base beat," was all he said, and over at the blackboard, the air indicator moved up a millimeter, light down half a millimeter, work stayed where it was. 3-2-3, neat, as if the beat was wearing a suit today. The boat nodded. I felt my head grow large again. Outside, a woolly cloud of silt pushed along the rib of a wreck, and for a moment, I thought I heard voices. Not singing, not talking. More like the humming of things that had been in the water too long. Conseil whispered,

"Don't listen." Ned said, "I hear what I want, and I want out." His hands hung heavy at the wrists as if they were bricks.

The crew immersed themselves in their rituals. Helmets on, hose on, straps through the cold mouth of the buckle, glove checking glove. One labeled a box with chalk, numbers like gravestones. Another drew a line across the sight glass with his finger, as if bribing the weather. I moved closer to the pane. His breath made little clouds, they died instantly. And then the shit happened that you can't sell to a technician without them laughing at you and secretly starting to drink: the condensation didn't settle by chance. It gathered, contracted, became a line, a stingy, shiny thread. It crawled sideways. Sideways, not down. As if gravity were too tired to care today. The thread bent, made a tight turn, traced a kind of map, a childish coastal fuss, but deliberate. It stopped where a hull lay crooked in the mud outside, half open, its mouth full of nails. The drop at the end of the thread vibrated briefly in a 3-2-3 pattern, didn't come loose, and remained as if nailed to the spot. Ned said, "What the—" but didn't finish. Conseil whispered, "Impossible." Nemo only looked briefly, so briefly that the gesture was almost an insult. "That's where we start," he said. And the drop nodded. Or maybe I imagined it. I don't care. It nodded.

The crew broke up into hand movements. No conversation, just those small, honest sounds when metal hits metal and two things briefly consider who's boss. The bell still hung on the swing arm, dull as an old knee, but ready to crack again. One man tested the seal with his thumb, another ran a brass hook along the edge as if checking teeth. Chalk markings on the crates: numbers, arrows, little curses you only write when your hands are dirty and the night asks no questions. The rope ran over the pulley like a lie told too many times. The winch man cranked with a calm that had something threatening about it. As if he were frothing milk instead of lowering us into hell.

Nemo stepped up to the plate, and the plate obeyed as if it had never learned to say no. "Light minus half," he said, and the lamps obediently screwed themselves into a brownish half-light that took the edge off any truth. "Air plus half," and you could practically hear some valve puffing out its cheeks. "Work holds." The hands trembled, finding the beat, 3-2-3, the faithful asshole of rhythms. Over by the sight glass, the wreck lay almost brazenly in the phosphorus. Sharks skirted around it as if they were wearing uniforms, brightly polished bouncers with bad manners. You didn't see their mouths, only the logic in their movements: circle, circle, small hook, circle again. The Nautilus growled softly, not angrily, more like a dog growls when it thinks someone is stealing its food bowl.

"Helmets," said one of the silent bill takers, and two men pulled on their glasses as if they were stepping into an old rumor. The gloves slipped into the cuffs, rubber dust in the air. A third adjusted the lead plates, two straps across, one low, one high, the whole misery of gravity organized with buckles. I saw the wrinkles in his palms. They looked like small rivers that always take the same course, no matter who shouted at them. Meanwhile, Conseil was writing down numbers. Not because anyone asked him. Because it was his way of believing he could keep the world in check if he just divided it neatly into rows. He muttered, "One: bell. Two: hook. Three: box. Four: way back." Way back, I thought, screw you. Ned stood beside me, his hands heavy as two problems. He was burning. You could see it, that flat, bright rage that pretends to be cold until it stabs in. "If he opens the door," he hissed, "I'm through." "Where to, you genius?" "Out. Up. Away." "Through water, steel, sharks, and God himself." "Then everyone gets a missed kiss from me."

Nemo heard everything and ignored everything, both in the same movement. He tapped the pressure gauge with a finger, as gently as if confiding a secret to a child. "Pressure gently," he said. The man at the winch nodded as if he'd just heard a sermon. The bell hovered a few fingers' width, then smacked its rim briefly against steel, like an unwanted kiss. "Blow out," someone said. A short, wet sound. The seal tightened, you heard it, a small, satisfied "mmh" through the hull. "Signal." Someone yanked the line once, twice, three times. The bell answered dully. A communication from people who talk more with their hands than with their mouths.

I stepped closer to the plate. Three large circular dials, as if three phases of the moon had been cut out and nailed to the wall. Air, light, work. And then the pressure, independent, arrogant. A pointer with a red mouth. The surface of the dials had that slight milky sheen you only get when the fingers of hell run over it often enough. "Damned organ," Ned growled. "You'll play what I say." "You say that to everything," I said. "And how many times has it helped?" "Once is enough." He grinned too broadly. Someone in the back pulled the bell chain, a whir, a snap, then the thing stood neatly in the swing. Outside, the wreck glowed. Phosphorus clung to the seams as if someone had used a bad halo spray. I thought the sea was the oldest garbage dump in the world and also the honest undertaker. It takes everything, it keeps everything, and it says nothing—unless you push.

"Lights down," repeated Nemo, one more breath, and the lamps obeyed. The glass in the salon no longer reflected us so clearly; only deliberate shadows. Good thing. Reflexes are lies that kick in at the right moment. "Air up," another soft sigh from somewhere in the belly of the machine. I felt my lungs grow

greedy, stretching, even though they knew they would have to pay later. "There's still work to be done," murmured Nemo like a threat. I saw the crew react to the word, almost imperceptibly. There's still work to be done. This boat can beg, it can growl, but in the end, it holds out the milk can and says: Milk. And we milk. Because we always milk.

The bell rang the doorbell as if it had house rights. The threshold gave way, reluctantly, like an old maid who has trained for years to say yes but still hates it. One last look at the sharks. They were still circling, stern, methodical. One passed close to the glass, so close you could have counted the ridges in your eye if your eye had ridges. Instead, everything was smooth. A knife without a handle. "I'll swim up to that bastard's ear," Ned growled. "You don't have any gills," Conseil said, "you owe money." "I owe money everywhere." "Then pay me later." Without comment, he pressed a belt into his hand, like a thought you can't get rid of.

I felt the pressure beginning to nibble at my ribs. Nothing dramatic. Just that cautious, polite pinch, as if the ocean were knocking and asking if it could have the blanket. The Nautilus answered with its hum. Somewhere a rivet slipped, a whisper: I've got you. A circle vibrated in the glass, barely visible, a phantom of sound. The wreck was moving closer, or we were, or the truth was wriggling between them. "Up," said Nemo. The door of the bell opened, a sinister mouth. Two men stepped in as if descending a staircase that didn't exist. The third offered them hook, line, and line. Not a word. Just the hand that knows when to let go. The door swung shut. A hammering of the bolts, a short, fat click. The bell made that sound that only things make when they know they're now alone.

"Down." The winch sang deeper. The rope grew solemn. I felt the pull in the floor, a fine, honest tug. The air in the saloon was suddenly a stranger, scrutinizing you. Ned stepped to the viewing glass, so close that his breath formed little moons that immediately died. "They go in there like they're going to confession," he said. "I hope they know the priest." "That's Nemo," I said. "He's his own god." Ned spat on the floor. The saliva narrowly missed a screw, and he was offended.

I glanced at the plate again. The air indicator was now at plus half. Fine. Light minus half. Good. Work: steady, thick as a judgment. And the pressure—the pressure crept. Step by step, neat, orderly, like the steps to the cellar door you don't like. I swore I could feel it in my teeth. Nemo pressed his fingertips to the glass of the pressure scale, not to feel, but to make it harder for the thing to lie. "Don't gawk," he said quietly, more to the machine than to us. "Do what you're

here for." The boat listened to him. Or I told myself that, because we all need stories when the facts smack of metal.

Outside, a phosphorescent streak passed by the bell, as if someone had ripped open an old scar. The sharks kept their distance, respectful, not fearful. You could see they knew things we'd never know. Ned jabbed his finger against the viewing glass, as if testing a mattress. "Shut up," I said. "This is our last window." "I don't like windows. They act like there's something different out there than what's in here." "But it is." "I've seen enough differences that it all hurts in the end."

In the corner stood the box with the spare hoses. One of them lurched to the beat, as if he had stage fright. Conseil went over and laid his hand on it. He made a fool of himself, but it helped. The hose calmed down. Perhaps because he knew the hand. Perhaps because matter sometimes shows decency when treated decently. "All right," whispered Conseil, and the hose pretended to whisper back. I swore I heard it, but that could have been the air saying something again.

The winch stopped. The bell was now above the mouth of the wreck, slightly offset, at a clean angle. The winchman clicked his tongue, a click that had more feeling than half the officer academy. Nemo raised a hand, then let it fall again. "Go," he said, and the word scratched into the silence. Nothing came from the bell. Of course not. No sound, no movement. Just a breath, which you only notice when you're close enough to hear sweating. Then this thing you might call Santa Claus, if it weren't shitty work: first rope, then hook, then chop. Metal against metal, distant, ghostly, but clear. "They've got it," murmured Conseil. His voice was a jackknife. Ned gritted his teeth. His teeth sought argument, found only salt.

I stayed with the record. And then came the moment that didn't fit into the manual. The pressure indicator had settled on a number everyone liked. It stood there, content, an official at the counter. And suddenly, it took a small backward breath. Not a tremor. Not a slip. A tick. Back. As if someone had taken it by the nose with the tiniest invisible hand. It held on there for a heartbeat, so cheekily that "You can't do that" wanted to escape my lips. And then it continued forward, as if it had to make up for what it had missed. Nemo saw it. I saw it. Ned saw it and grinned. "See," he said. "The world is tired of always obeying orders to move forward."

The bell disappeared like a guilty conscience, slowly, squelching, into its own shadow. The rope sang deeper, the winds took on that bone-hard timbre when

steel tells the water who's dragging whom today. I felt the tug beneath my soles, as if the planks were a tongue piercing and the ocean was tugging at it. In the glass, the wreck grew large, not because it was growing, but because we were shrinking. A bent back with nails. Cracks like the laughter of people who don't like you. The phosphorus skin flickered across it, fake halos on rotten bones. Ned stood so close to the viewport that his breath blew out little moons that died instantly. "Come on," he muttered, not to the boat, not to the sea—to the occasion he didn't even recognize. Conseil had the pad and the chalk; he wasn't just numbering loot, he was also numbering our stupidities, invisible, legible only to him. One: pressure. Two: sight. Three: Hunger. Four: Ned.

From the depths crept the sound of the bell, first a gurgle, then a clean, dull belly thump. Pull once—answer. Twice—answer. Three times—and the answer sounded a bit like a coffin pleased to have a job again. Nemo raised his hand, let it fall, made a small, contemptuous gesture with his fingers, as if the machine had told him an anecdote he already knew. "Holding angle two degrees to port," he said as casually as if it were only a matter of moving the needle of a record by a fart. The man on the auxiliary winch released rope, barely, just the shadow of his weight. The Nautilus gave that subliminal nod it makes when it's adjusting the world. A shark swooped past the wreck, brushing a plume of silt with its foamy lip, which remained there like a bad resolution.

Then began the sounds that make you a believer, even if you hate religion: metal talking to metal. A hook finding a home. An edge slipping, insulted. Wood ceasing to be wood and finally becoming merely a task. It came through the hull, through the planks, through my teeth. The first blow was a quiet triumph, the second a warning, the third the contract. A shadow lifted, a box—not large, but heavy with stories—floated from the belly of the ship's skeleton, as if gravity had taken pity and offered a vacation. The line took it, tightened, vibrated in a 3-2-3, because everything here sings in the same damn chorus. The winch man pulled, arms straight, his posture an insult to anyone who ever thought work needed theater.

"Box one," said Conseil. "Mediocrity." "Mediocrity will eventually eat you up," growled Ned. "I want the big one with the purpose." "Purpose is an invention of your fists," said Conseil. "It's a damned hobby," Ned retorted, his fingers grinding their own flour. I looked at Nemo. He stood still like a lie that has learned to behave like the truth. His eyes ran over the scales, the plate breathed obediently. Air: plus half. Light: minus half. Work: equal. Pressure crept forward, quite honestly, quite officially. "Don't get nervous," muttered Nemo to the pointer, and I hated him for talking to things and having them answer him.

The box appeared at the top of the pane, shimmering, chained, as if we were carrying a corpse through the cathedral. You could see the nails, flat, brown, each one a small coffin nail in a larger coffin we've always deserved. Two men in scuba gear came into view, silent like taxi drivers who no longer like cities. One gave hand signals, old, terse, reliable. The other freed the hook and replaced it, as expertly as if he had joints made of ground-down ice. The bell hung beside it, a bulbous mouth that was no longer interested in appearing modest. A second line shot out, spasmed briefly, then the box stood clumsily in the current, like a sleeping dog that nevertheless knows where the door is.

"Lift," said Nemo. It wasn't an order. It was a weather report. The winchman obeyed, the boat hummed, and I heard that tired cheer in my ribs: another ripped (out) of what wants to stay. The box disappeared from view, but we recognized it by the sound, like a piece of furniture in the next room, tumbling across the floor. Behind the bulkhead: a short, stubborn protest from a bolt, then a groan from the rubber lips on the inner lock. A "Come in" without any politeness. I imagined the hook clanging on the ceiling inside, a chain laughing, a man cursing as the edge kissed his shin—and I liked it because it was honest.

"Two," Conseil said, writing without looking. The bell answered, different pitch, different belly. No coincidence. The second shadow was longer, flatter, a chest perhaps, a theologian full of water. The divers pushed, the line did its pious duty. A shark brushed the bell. I saw the vibration in the glass, a wave running in the shape of a slap. The diver raised his hand: Wait. The winch man stopped as if Nemo had put a wire in his spine. The shark passed by, casually, as if it had an appointment it couldn't miss. The wreck groaned in its own dialect. For a moment, I heard words in the noise. I don't want to hear that again.

"Rear rib," murmured Nemo, "don't let it touch." The man on the auxiliary winch set the angle, only two degrees, but the Nautilus understood and did what it does: it flirted briefly with the current, yielded, took up space without losing face. The second crate came free and settled neatly into a plumb line. "Two," repeated Conseil. Ned stood beside it, unused as a hammer at a wedding. His hands pretended to be steady, but his knuckles burned. "I want to break something," he said. "Breaking is a vitamin," I said. "It'll eat you up if you suck on it for too long." "I'm not a child." "Then keep it until later."

The winds sang again, deep, contented, and somewhere in the structure, a piece of metal made that small, mean vibration that says: I'm here, I'm holding, I won't cry. The second box disappeared inward. Behind the bulkhead, it sounded different than before: a sound that knew more about money. Coins, I thought. Or the clatter of an altar that no one needs anymore. Nemo didn't

make a sound of joy. He was breathing, and his breathing sounded as if he'd practiced it for centuries. "Three," said Conseil. "Fine." He shoved the chalk into his pocket, pulled it out again, as if he were afraid it might get bored without him. I saw the bell snap back up, line slack, line taut, the whole damned ballet that ultimately amounts to nothing more than muscle soreness. In the corner, the spare hook clanged, very quietly, quite offended because he wasn't allowed to.

The third shadow wasn't a box. It was an edge, a door panel perhaps, a piece of the side of the ship into which someone had once carved a name, which the water had now greedily washed away. The divers poked, heaved, wrestled, and the hull of the Nautilus listened as if it were the ceiling over a fight tolerated as long as no one touches the lamp. The sound creeping through the saloon was old; it smelled of barrels, of sweat, of an hour in port just before the end of my shift. I closed my eyes and could almost taste wood. Ned nudged me with his elbow. "You're getting sentimental." "I'm hungry." "For what?" "A world where things cease to be you when they break." He laughed toothlessly. "The world is happy to disappoint you."

The third load came, stubborn, scratching, as if it had an opinion. The winch took one step too far, pulled it back, so cleanly you could smell the sweat it was avoiding. And then came that false song that only machines can manage: a tone that pretends everything is fine, even though somewhere a pinched piece of reality is raising its middle finger. I noticed it on the record. The needles were correct, the readings were flawless. But the room took on a different flavor. A hint of ozone, yes, but more: a hint of refusal. The Nautilus seemed to whisper to me: I can hold my breath longer than you. You don't want to try.

Nemo took a step toward the glass, just one. He looked at the bell jar, at the divers, at the scraping rim of mud. "Go on," he said, and it sounded like: Fill up my living room. Conseil wrote a three, then a small cross behind it. "What does that mean?" asked Ned. "Flaw in the wood," said Conseil. "Or in you." "I don't have any flaws. I have solutions that scream." "Scream later." He fiddled with his jacket like someone looking for an invisible thread that holds everything together. I understood him. If you stare into the glass long enough, you'll want to pull threads everywhere.

The fourth attempt at lifting changed the tone. Not outside—inside. The line picked up something that clinked, fine, creaking, like a cutlery tray from another marriage. The sound filtered through the hull, but it remained true. A thing that wanted to be beautiful when it was still allowed to be. Ned twisted his mouth. "Leave him," I said. "Perhaps beautiful things will help us later,

when we have to lie." "Beautiful things never help," he said. "It only spoils your teeth." "Then rinse with the truth." "It tastes worse." "Exactly." He grinned briefly. I liked him best when he grinned against his own logic.

The winch stopped. A jerk. A counter-jerk. The room held its breath, and even the pressure gauge pretended it didn't exist. Then the load slid. Spined freely. Rising. Behind the bulkhead, again that brief, intimate kneeling of the machine when it's taking off someone's boots. A "mm." A "yes." I hated that I liked it. I hated that I was thinking, "This is a good day to be bad."

And then the thing happened that you don't need to explain to any engineer because they'll throw you out before you can finish your sentence. The saloon was quieter than quiet. Just the faithful hum, just the winches, just a man watching his own breath so he doesn't lose it. The bell hung outside, unmistakable, visible. Not a rope moved. Not a hand nearby. The divers were off to the side, a knot of shadow over the wreck's ragged mouth. And suddenly it came: a clean, crystal-clear bang, as if a bell were being rung with joy. A second, brighter one, a third, deeper one. Not a tug on the signal line. Not a footstep. Not a stupid joke. Just the sound, rolling over to us, through glass, through salt, through tin, and making itself at home in our sternums. Ned looked at me as if I'd betrayed him. Conseil held the chalk in the air as if it would break if he brought it back down. Nemo blinked slowly once, out of principle, and said nothing. I swear, the bell outside rang a fourth time, more quietly, as if it were giggling. And I thought: The sea has a sense of humor. Damn good humor.

The madness came not like a storm, but like a wet glove over the face: slowly, thoroughly, without interest in approval. I don't know if it was the pressure or the graveyard behind the glass, probably both—two old friends forcing you to drink until you drink willingly. At first it was just the edges of your vision, those flitting mosquitoes you ignore until they form letters. Then it became sounds that weren't theirs. The Nautilus hummed its beat, 3-2-3, as dutifully as a metronome with Stockholm syndrome, and suddenly, right between two beats, I heard something that had no place: a small, offended child's cough. I stopped. The air stopped. Ned did too, but only because he noticed I stopped. "What?" he snarled. "Nothing," I said, "the machine's in a bad mood." Conseil pushed past us as if he had a date with reason. He tapped the window, not hard, just the way you test a lie.

Outside, the phosphorus slid like thin pus over the ribs of the dead ships. A hull edge slid into view, torn, curled up, as if someone had tried to fold paper from iron and then got tired of it. Something bright was wedged between two ribs.

At first, I thought: shell, glass, a piece of mirror stuck to the wrong world. It was a shoe. Tiny, gray, the leather swollen, the lacing like the fingers of a drowned man, never wanting to hold on to anything again. I tore my gaze away, because some things don't belong in your head if you want to breathe. "I saw him too," Conseil said matter-of-factly, without looking at me. Ned remained firm. "I see sharks," he growled. "Everything else is props for people who think too much."

The bell below did its belly singing, reliably, like a worker who's toiled so long he's forgotten what he's for. A crate swung plumb; the line vibrated, the winch answered. Nemo gave a hand signal, terse, two fingers, an angle. The boat obeyed as if we'd put it in a bad home. And then came the grazing. Not from the outside—from the inside. As if an entire wreck, a reef of nails, were briefly scraping against our skin. The glass took on that high-pitched note that feeds your brain needles. The rivets in the frame clacked out of sync, a tiny revolt. The Nautilus laughed. I swear, it laughed. Not a giggle—that short, dry exhalation of an animal that knows it's stronger than your day.

"Port two!" Nemo shouted, as if it were a move in a bar team game. The man on the auxiliary winch let go of rope, took rope, gave rope, a dancer who hates his knees. The bell dodged, the shadow of the box tilted, recovered. Sharks pulled tighter, polite as doormen, just waiting for you to blame yourself. The pressure gnawed at my ribs; every breath felt like someone was counting me in a wet sack. Ned pressed his forehead almost to the glass. "If it goes bang, I'm going," he said. "Where?" I wanted to ask. He grinned crookedly. "In the direction that doesn't go bang anymore."

The record stumbled. There was only a whisper in the hands, a roll of the eyes. Air remained clean, light hung bitchy in its half-darkness, but Work, the fat old whore, made a misstep. One tiny tug down, two up – that was enough. 2-3-2, ugly, angular, as if someone had poured sand into the organ. The parlor narrowed, the shadows took on edges that hadn't suited them yesterday. I heard voices again, not of people, more of things: wood trying its final "no"; rope remembering that it was once hemp, that knew sun and rain, and a girl who wove it into a net. "Push-pull," Conseil said, so quietly I had to feel it to hear it. He pulled a small, offended chain, set a slider back half a measure. Air remained, light remained, Work grumbled, then calmed down, gritting its teeth.

The bell below was now halfway down the open throat of the wreck, and I saw Schlick rising. Schlick is usually a cowardly dog: he stays down, pretending to be the ground. Today he was an artist. He rose. Not because we stirred him up—he rose, slowly, orderly, as if he had stairs. A plume of dirt climbed up the side

and stayed there for a moment, as if there were an invisible nail above on which someone was hanging wet laundry. Ned swore so beautifully I almost wanted to clap. "That's not possible," Conseil gritted through teeth that weren't made for prayer. Nemo put two fingers to the pressure glass, his gaze piercing, and said nothing. He didn't even say "Quiet." He waited until the world remembered him.

Then came the near-collision, the kind that sucks the life out of you. A rib cage, rusty and wide, rammed its shadow into our window. No contact, a whisker shadow, a razor that stops a millimeter from the skin. Every fiber in the salon shrank, even the light. The hands on the dial suddenly behaved perfectly, as if they were about to be promoted. The winch kept the note, the bell stood clean, the sharks circled in business class, and yet – the world was crooked. I felt like the Nautilus was holding its breath, and we were all with it. Then the rib cage slid by, slowly, disrespectfully, like a bishop in a strange brothel.

"Go on," said Nemo, and the word gave us our lungs back. The winch man lost three teeth, took two, the bell dropped a hand's breadth, the tone jumped a semitone lower, and suddenly there was room in our heads again for what out there doesn't want to die: greed, salt, order. Ned massaged his knuckles. "I'll punch him in the face anyway," he muttered, and no one asked who. Conseil put a small line on its invisible edge: not today. I leaned my forehead against the cold frame, just briefly, as if holding out my hand to an animal so it could smell that I'm not armed. It helped me more than it did him.

In the corner, a loosely attached hook vibrated, though nothing was pushing it. The sound ran into the belly of the Nautilus, circled around down there, and came back as another. I could taste the battery again. The phosphorus outside glowed slower, thicker, as if someone had stretched it. Between two ribs, the child's shoe turned once, hesitantly, as if it were about to bow, and then sank a finger's breadth again, only to immediately snap up defiantly – a small, stupid gesture against everything that has rules.

And while I was still debating whether I should be more afraid of the sea or of us, the thing that physics likes to demand from space happened. A broad shred of silt lifted from the bottom, formed a wave with shoulders, ran vertically up the wreck, settled like smoke on an invisible edge – and stayed there. Not for a breath. For five. Floating filth, nailed high, as if someone had told gravity to step outside for a moment and not listen. Ned whispered a "Holy shit" without a holy. Conseil blinked as if a gnat stood between him and the law. Nemo didn't smile. He said, "Don't record anything." And the silt stayed where it couldn't stay.

Ned was on fire. He wasn't running, but every step looked as if he were trying to set the planks on fire. His fingers played with the valve on the emergency tank, roughly, uncaringly, as if it were a bar he was about to close down. "If that bastard up there gives us another lecture, I'll turn this and then he can watch his damn submarine wheeze." Conseil stood between him and the screw, as calm as a teacher who knows the students are still secretly smoking. "If you turn it, we'll all suffocate." Ned grinned. "At least there'll be peace." I stood by and hated that he was right. Nemo didn't move. He had eyes in his back, you could feel them, like two daggers without metal. "Stand back," he said, not to Ned, not to Conseil, not to me—to the machine. And damn it, the thing obeyed. The dial twitched, Arbeit arched his back briefly, then straightened again. Ned growled. "He listens to him more than to God." Conseil smoothed the valve as if one could stroke steel. "Maybe he's God," he said. Ned spat. "Then he's a small god with a very narrow dick."

I tried not to laugh, because Nemo would have heard me. Instead, I looked at the sliders. Three levers, neatly arranged next to each other, like children with clasped hands. A moment ago, chaos, now back to 3-2-3, as if they had a damn conductor's baton up their asses. I wanted to touch them, check them, feel if they were warm from all that self-dancing. But I let it go. You don't fiddle with things that move without hands. "Take note," Conseil muttered. "What?" "That he saw it." He scribbled chalk on the edge of the desk, three lines, like a bill no one pays. Ned wasn't finished. He raised his fist as if he could intimidate the wall with it. "The boat is eating us. Piece by piece." Nemo finally turned around, slowly, as if he'd rehearsed this long enough. "No," he said. "The boat is eating the world. You're just passengers."

The words stuck, like arrows in the wood. No pathos, no opera. Just a sentence that made the room feel smaller. Ned laughed, a dry, broken thing. "Then I'll rip the world's throat out." Conseil shook his head, as if it were math that just didn't add up. I rubbed my forehead. Everything vibrated, everything sounded as if a hundred little clocks were ticking incoherently. In the corner, near the spare hoses, there was suddenly a wrench. No one had put it there. It was just standing there, upright, leaning without support. The vibration from the boat should have sent it to hell long ago. Instead, it stuck, motionless, like a dog that's decided to act like a statue today. Ned saw it. Conseil saw it. I did too. No one said a word. We all breathed in unison, as if we'd arranged to meet. And the wrench grinned, without a mouth, without teeth, just by damn staying.

The crisis came like a kick in the back—no warning signal, no polite knock. At first, there was just a whine in the cable, a sound that didn't belong there. Then the glass in the saloon shattered, vibrating as if someone had scraped across it

with a rusty knife. The sharks outside noticed immediately, pulling tighter, faster, the perfect bastards in circles. "Stop!" shouted one of Nemo's henchmen, but the winch already had a mind of its own. The rope broke, not quite, just a bundle of fibers, enough for everyone to know: if that thing lets go, there'll be no repeat. The bell trembled, the divers inside raised their hands, silent, pleading, but more to the technology than to us.

Nemo raised his arms, not dramatically, more like a conductor beckoning an orchestra into the abyss. "Correct," he said, and the Nautilus obeyed. Not the men, not the winds—the boat itself took a step, glided, turned, as if it had decided weeks ago to do this dance today. The deck tilted, air minus a quarter, work plus a half, light nailed down. We all held our breath, and outside the wreck sang its death aria. A rib slammed against the bell, a dull, metallic sound, a blow to the brain. One of the divers whirled, kicked out with his foot as if to kick the ocean. Sharks darted closer, saw blood, smelled fear, then veered away because the boat was looking at them.

I was glued to the glass, feeling the vibration hammering through my forehead into my skull. Ned yelled something about "Screw the rules!", yanked on a lever, Conseil swatted his hand away, and they both almost fell. Nemo only turned his head slightly. "Quiet," he said, and calm came because the boat brought it. The bell caught. The rope groaned, tightened, held. The pressure gauge went crazy, danced two scales higher, then stayed, panting like an old dog. I thought: Now it's going to break. But it didn't. It held. Everything held. And there was more violence in that hold than in any break.

The glass in front of us flickered, not from the light, but from the horizon itself. As if outside, an invisible hand were shaking the entire ocean. Lines jumped, shadows widened, then thinned again, the child's shoe danced in the mud like a cursed puppet. Ned grabbed my arm. "Do you see that?" "I see too much," I said, and it was the truth. The Nautilus made a noise no ship should make: a deep, throaty growl that sounded more animal than mechanical. The sharks backed away. The wreck was silent. The bell hung still again, as if nothing had happened.

Then the trick happened. Three sliders on the board, which had just been wobbling like petulant children, suddenly buckled firmly into the starting position: 3-2-3. No one touched them. Not a single man, not a gust of wind, not a tremor. They jumped, clack, clack, clack, cleanly, in line, as if an invisible hand had said, "Okay, stop now." Conseil stared, chalk in the air. Ned cursed a prayer. Nemo just nodded, small, almost content, and his eyes said, "You have no idea how long this has been going on."

The aftermath tasted like rust on the tongue. The bell had been raised, soaking wet, the ropes steaming as if they had their own lungs. Crates were now stacked like stupid certificates at the edge, every nail, every coin, every damned icon board grinning at us: look, we still have teeth. The crew put everything away with the calm of a gravedigger. Not a word, just hook out, bolts tighten, locks closed. Ned paced back and forth like a dog who already feels the chain before it's around his neck. "I swear, next time I'll punch him in the mouth," he growled, and everyone knew he meant Nemo, and everyone knew he was probably really trying. Conseil wrote arrows on the floor with chalk, small innocent symbols, as if they were breadcrumbs for a way back we'd never get anyway. "Take a note," he muttered. "What for?" "So we know we lived, if someone denies it."

Nemo walked in, dry sentences in his pocket, like cigarette butts. "Loot secured. Wreck exhausted. Explanation later." No emphasis, no sugar, just cement. He didn't even look to see if we were listening. We were inventory. His eyes scanned the slab, nodded curtly, as if the day had passed. Ned bared his teeth, Conseil held chalk, I sucked in air that tasted of lead. Then he was gone. No door slammed, not even a shoe. Just footsteps that knew they had the right to trespass.

The Nautilus calmed down. The humming was deeper again, full, like after an orgasm no one wanted. The sliders were stubbornly set to 3-2-3. No one had touched them. No one. I saw the wrench, still firmly attached to the wall, as if it were nesting there. I stared, Ned stared, Conseil stared. No one dared to touch it. And then it happened: A coin pressed itself to the glass inside. Just like that. One of those, the one that had just come out of the box. Wet, shiny, with a face on it I didn't recognize. It stuck there, as if with saliva, as if with will. Outside, a shadow glided by, too fast, too big to be a shark. An eye, not round, not clear, but a slit full of night. I swore it was looking at us, right through the coin. Ned let out a sound, half rage, half astonishment. Conseil made three more marks on the floor. I held my breath. And the coin vibrated briefly to the beat of 3-2-3 before it came loose, landed, and lay still as if nothing had ever happened.

Nemo tells shit from his past

The salon smelled of wet fabric, oil, and the long teeth of the night. The glass stood like an altar in the belly of an animal that had decided to spare no one today. Outside, the wreckage slowly receded, reluctantly, like a drinker pushing

back his chair but keeping his eyes on the bottle. Phosphorus still clung to the darkness in streaks, as if someone had traced the grief with neon. The record purred its basic beat, 3-2-3, with the complacency of a clock that knows all the others must follow it. Air just above, light just below, work on "eat it." I felt the machine in my cartilage, as honest as a tomcat. Ned stood with his legs apart at the bench, his fists clutching two unpaid bills. Conseil sorted glances into piles: I need them, I don't need them, I'll put them back if it's urgent.

Nemo came in, without drama, without commotion, just with that accursed calm that is harder than any fight. He wore no stories on his face, just a blade. Behind him were two of his screw-believers: hands like vises, eyes like threads. Nemo stopped where the plates kissed his ribs and looked at us as if we were notes on the edge of a map. "Listen," he said. A word that fell like a key into the lock. "Don't ask." Another key, another lock. "Breathe in time." He raised his hand, and the plate nodded, 3-2-3, 3-2-3, like a judge tapping his gavel on the table for confirmation. Ned laughed, a sound like the touch of a broken doorknob. Conseil said nothing, but wrote it in the air anyway.

On the table lay a world in miniature and in wounds: maps with pinpricks, a logbook with a torn edge, a chronometer that acted as if it had never lied, a quill in an inkbed that was already starting up again, a locket – scarred, reluctant, as if it had been carried for too long in pockets that also housed knives. Beside it was a mug that smelled of tea and smelled of rum. “Sit down,” said Nemo, and no one sat; we fell onto benches as if we’d fallen off a shelf. He stayed standing because, for some people, standing is a throne. Outside, beyond the glass, a patient rib drifted by, a piece of ship that looked like the spine of some animal that had never belonged on dry land. A shark grazed the corner of the field of view, didn’t wave, turned away. The print scraped at the ribs, politely, consistently, the “good day” of a believer who never forgets.

"I speak," said Nemo, "and you listen." His voice wasn't a barrage, more like scissors cutting paper, neatly, without a margin. Ned opened his lips to a question, but before the question reached the world, Nemo brushed it aside. "No past is clean. Mine is more necessary." He looked at the record as if he had said the sentence to it, not to us, and the air indicators gave way a millimeter, as if to make room. Light went down another half beat, the lamps turned yellowish, insulted, parlor light that repels every truth before it can shine. Work remained, because with this man, work always remains. "So you want to preach," grumbled Ned. "He wants to calculate," said Conseil. "Sermons can calculate," said Nemo. "Numbers know no mercy."

He placed two fingers on the logbook as if checking his own pulse. He didn't turn the locket; he only placed his thumb on the scar running across it, a silent, ugly smile made of metal. "I'll start with hunger," he said. "That's how all stories begin that won't die." Ned snorted a "Bah." In the corner, the chronometer ticked, neatly, as if wearing a vest. I noticed the salon shrinking, not because the walls were moving, but because his sentences were eating up space. Outside, a cloud of mud rose as if it wanted to listen. Inside, the eyes of Nemo's men moved over us, not a threat, just accounting: two debts, a risk, a discrepancy—and everything breathing in time.

"Before," said Nemo, "there was land I despised and names I no longer need." He spoke as if cutting maggots from a piece of fruit. "There were books that educated me and men who wanted to bind me. There was a house that thought it was a fortress and a road that betrayed me to the sea." He left pauses like steps, and with each step I heard the record catch a breath, as if accompanying him on a staircase we cannot see. Ned flexed his knuckles as if they were counting. Conseil wrote with his finger on the table: an invisible arrow pointing at the cracks in the wood. "So you hurl your legend at us," I said, "and hope we mistake the splinters for nails." His eyes found me, two nails driving themselves into the wall. "I hope nothing." He spoke "hope" so neutrally that it sounded like a command.

He adjusted the chronometer with a fingernail, a thought in his mind. "Time's a pussy down here: it retreats if you get rough." Ned grinned briefly, despite himself. "Then be rough." "I'm precise," said Nemo. The record hummed, contentedly, like an animal that has recognized its rightful owner. Outside, the world hung on the glass like a dirty curtain. The wreckage was quietly peeling away; every change of edge was a turning of the page without fingers. The shark returned, moving further away now, as if it had thought of something.

"You want to hear about origins," Nemo began. "Origins are a place where others believe they have the right to pick you up." His hand glided over the cards, not tenderly, more like a blade testing skin. The pinpricks in the paper shit were old mosquito bites, each one a "here." He drew a line, with the air, not with a pen: from a sea that tastes of salt to a sea that tastes of blood; from a city that stands upright to a ship that never docks again. The lamps longed for a clear conscience, yet remained in yellow silence. "I don't go on excursions," he said. "I do calculations."

Ned gave him a look that always involves searching for his right hand behind his back. "Bills are just lists of things you've taken from others." "Or that they owe you," Nemo said without any tone. "We're not in your bank." "You're

everywhere in my bank, as long as you breathe what I pay for." That wasn't a threat, just mathematics. I swallowed a bitter metallic taste. Conseil dragged his fingers along the edge of the table; was he counting the notches or weighing the lies—I didn't know. The tabletop let out a small, contented sigh, like a monk savoring a prayer. 3-2-3. I hated the clock more than the man.

Condensation ran down the glass. At first, obediently, vertically, as natural science dictates. Small tears that carry their misery down a surface. I didn't stare, but the eye has its own habits. The drops grew thicker, closer, they met, like strangers who realize they have the same last name. And then the stuff did what it shouldn't: It stopped. Not briefly. Stopped. It stretched across. Sideways, slowly, the most defiant alphabet in the world. One stroke, then a second, a tight hook, a short bulge—R. Then U. Then H. Then E. CALM. Neat, crooked, defiant. It stuck there as if invisible nails had tacked the letters to the pane. Ned saw it and whispered, "Saint—" Conseil inhaled, counted "one, two, three" to stave off the panic. I looked at Nemo. He hadn't looked. He didn't need to. He'd already read the room before us. “Listen,” he repeated calmly, and only when his voice filled the salon did the four letters separate, finally sliding down, becoming dumb drops—and forgetting what they had just said.

"Origin," said Nemo, as if pulling a bone from his throat, "is a place with too many neighbors." He rolled the word on his tongue, dry, angular. "I had mountains behind me and a harbor in front of me." He mentioned a name that sounded of cinnamon and geography, then a second that promised another coast. Two countries, two calendars, as if the world had given him a new mother every morning. "There," he continued, "I learned that books are only tools as long as the fingers don't hesitate." His fingers never hesitated. They went over the maps without touching, as if cutting faces out of paper. The record made its obedient bow, 3-2-3, as if to save applause. Ned growled, the kind of noise you make in sheds when you don't have a good hammer. Conseil blinked slowly, counting the syllables—I knew he was calculating inside: date, dialect, dirt.

"Language came first," Nemo said. "Not mine. Theirs." He changed accents mid-sentence, as if the floor had tilted. A hard R, then a soft one, then none at all. "They said obedience is a dialect you have to learn early." He didn't laugh. I heard the chronometer ticking, so neatly I wanted to kick it. "I had teachers," Nemo continued, "who polished lenses until they split the world in two: seeing and believing." He named dates. One matched the war everyone knows about, the other was diagonal to a map that didn't want to exist. Conseil raised an eyebrow almost imperceptibly. Ned nudged me with his elbow. "He's a

straight-up liar," he whispered. "Tell him that." "You tell him that," I murmured. Ned pursed his lips in defiance. He wanted an occasion, not a lecture.

Nemo weighed the locket in his hand, not opening it, only examining it, as if one could bite into memory like gold. "They gave me mathematics like bread, physics like knives. I ate both and remained hungry." He pronounced the names of men that sounded like coordinates; I didn't recognize any of them, but their sharpness lingered in my ear. "A master in Cairo who taught me how currents lie at edges. Another in Calcutta who showed me how copper remembers. One in Brest who explained to me that screws are prayed hands that you force." Brest didn't fit the year he'd just mentioned. Conseil swallowed his "aha" and let it flow into his fingers instead: he drew an invisible bracket on the table. Ned rolled his shoulders. "I don't need a screw to hate him," he said. Nemo heard the hatred and took it like a temperature.

“Between the cities,” he continued, “lay sea. Between every sea lay a man with questions I refused to pay.” The record lifted the air a touch, as if it too wanted to say something and in the end kept to the beat. 3-2-3. “I washed decks until my hands knew the grain. I screwed plates until my fingers knew how steel whispers. I had conversations that began as interrogations and ended as silences.” His tone was bright; you could have shaved yourself off it. Outside, a final strip of phosphorus glowed, slowly going out. I heard my breathing, and I wanted it to be slower, just so I didn’t sound so much like a machine.

"Once," said Nemo, and the word was a thin, shadowy blade, "I came to a city made of nothing but fences." He called it by name, a name made of tar, salt, and colonial history that bore a different date in my mind than in his voice. "They wanted my belonging. I only had direction." He raised the cup, smelled it, didn't drink. "I learned there that passports mean nothing when men count you by your shadow." His hand was back on the logbook. The tear in the edge seemed to grow deeper the longer he stroked it. Ned rubbed his fists together. "Ask him the year," he hissed. "He said three." "He said two," whispered Conseil. "And the second contradicts the ship he named in the first." I nodded. I liked contradictions; they're the cheapest kind of truth.

Nemo placed his pen next to the logbook as if it were a knife kept handy. "You hear loopholes," he said, "and forget doors." He walked to the edge of the map, tapped a point in the sea. "Here"—he named a coordinate none of us could verify—"I learned that depth is not a number, but a gesture you repeat until it heals you or eats you." He went on, places like nails: Aden, Valparaíso, Pulo Penang. The list had more geography than skin. Conseil closed his eyes and rewound the tape in his head. "Valparaíso," he murmured, "before or

after—" He broke off. Nemo had turned his head, just a millimeter, as if the room had belched softly. "You're breathing too fast," he said mildly. The plate throttled air by a breath, and I hated him for allowing his word to speak through metal.

"And then there was a school that had no classrooms," Nemo said. "A dock so secret it didn't know itself." He didn't smile. "Guarded by men whose eyes never stopped thinking about weapons." He named a shipyard I knew only as a rumor and placed it in a year when, according to every damn newspaper in the world, nothing was built there except shame. "They had no plans for my boat," he said. "I had no plans for their lives." Ned snorted. "Now he's babbling poetically because he's lying." "He's modulating," Conseil whispered. "Like a damn whistle," Ned retorted.

I stared at the chronometer. It ticked, tight, precise, an official in brass. Nemo said, "Time there was soft." The word "soft" hung crookedly in the room, and precisely in that crooked hanging, the clock did what clocks don't do. The second hand made a clean backward tick. No tremor, no flip. A clear step back, as if time had admitted a mistake. It stood there for a heartbeat like a caught thief—and then continued running, precise, orderly, as if it were ashamed. Ned opened his eyes wide. "Did you—" "Yes," I said. Conseil opened his mouth and closed it again, as if words and teeth suddenly didn't agree.

Nemo acted as if nothing had happened. "Origin," he repeated, "is a bill others write for you. I bought mine back." He stroked the locket again, a thumbnail on metal, and I swore, for a second, the thing looked different—finer, younger, less scarred—like a photograph resisting the gaze. "And if you ask me what I'm away from," he said, "I say: from men who think time and the sea belong to them." Ned let out a short, angry breath. "Then we're agreed. I don't own either. But I'll bite if necessary." Nemo gave him the kind of non-glare that carries more weight than any argument. "You're useful as long as you breathe," he said, kind as a knife. "And as long as you breathe in time."

The record purred in agreement. 3-2-3. I felt the Nautilus would have grinned if it had a mouth. Outside, a final shadow scraped past the glass, as if the depths were drawing the curtain. The chronometer acted as if it had never gone backward. The pen glistened wetly, even though no one had dipped it in ink. Conseil made a tiny mark on the edge of the table with his index finger—an invisible cross for "Something's wrong here." Ned whispered to me, "The next time he slips, I'll ask him a question that'll make his beard pluck out." "Do it," I said. "But count to three first." "I'll count to zero." "Good luck then." And Nemo said nothing. He let the silence work. It works well here.

"War," said Nemo, and the word fell to the table like a rusty anvil. He placed his hand on the logbook as if it were a ribcage he wanted to breathe once more. "War is a school where no one stays put voluntarily." His voice was flat, dry, without heroic foam. He threw dates into the room, and two of them clashed as if they should never have existed side by side. A battle that came too soon, an uprising that came too late. Conseil marked an invisible cross on the edge of the table with his fingertip. Ned grinned crookedly. "Shit again." I nodded. Stories stink when they sound too clean.

"They put chains on me," Nemo continued, "thin, heavy, clanging words of iron." He described a harbor with no name, a place full of gallows from which no corpses hung, only shadows that lived longer than the men themselves. "They wanted to break me." He paused briefly. The panel lowered the light by half a beat, as if setting up the punchline. "They only broke my patience." Ned let out an ugly laugh. "Patience. He calls it patience. Sounds like a bullshit excuse." Nemo didn't look at him, he looked through him, as if Ned were just another beam in the wall.

He spoke of gunpowder, of trains full of blood, of ships that no longer carried flags because flags eventually smell like wet rags. "I took what I could," he said, "and swam until my lungs burst." He pointed to the glass, behind which the sea licked our foreheads like a tongue. "Water doesn't save anyone, but it forgets faster." I felt the room grow colder. Not the temperature—the attention. The crew was quieter than usual, and quieter here meant almost invisible. Only the hands on the slides, acting as if they had never trembled.

There was a pinprick on the map before him, small, almost innocent. Nemo put his finger to it, and right there, damn it, a red drop oozed out. Not a pen, not a knife, not an open wound. Just blood coming through paper, like a bad joke. He didn't pull his hand back. "This is where my freedom began," he said. "This is where they died." Ned snorted. "This is where you lie." "Perhaps," Nemo retorted. "But lies last longer when they bleed." The plate held work steady, air equal, light yellow, as if approving of the sentence. Conseil stared at the drop as if cataloging it. I smelled iron, but maybe it was just my own tooth. The chronometer ticked on as if nothing had happened. Outside, a shadow swam by, quieter than our thoughts.

"Family," said Nemo, and the word was so foreign to his mouth that it sounded as if he'd read it off a wall. He laid the locket on the table, the thing heavy with rust, sweat, maybe tears, if you wanted to get sentimental. He didn't open it right away. He made us wait. The room narrowed, as if the Nautilus itself had pricked up its ear. "Betrayal," he added, and that was closer to his tongue.

"Everyone carries both in the same sack." Ned snorted. "You don't have a sack anymore, old man." Nemo ignored him, as smoothly as if no one had said anything.

He opened the locket. Inside: a face. Or two. I swear, in the slanted light, I saw first a girl, then a boy, then nothing again—just a blank surface. "You were my reason," Nemo said. "And my rope." He snapped it shut, as if memory were an animal that would otherwise escape. The plate deflates, my chest rattling like an empty closet. "They took more than my country," he murmured, "they took the name that was mine." He pressed his hand flat against the logbook. "I replaced it with silence." Conseil looked, studied the light dancing across the metal. He wrote a question mark in the dust with his finger. Ned growled, "Talk shit like it's the Bible."

Nemo spoke of a door breaking in the night, of boots pushing into the house, of water faster than breath. "A club," he said, "that understood more than any word." He called a name, stopped, and bit it off as if it were poison. "The rest," he murmured, "I let drown." His eyes flickered for a moment—not warm, more like lamps about to burn out. Then they were cold again. "That's how you build revenge," he added. Ned spat on the floor, hitting a screw. "That's how you build fairy tales." Nemo smiled thinly. "Fairy tales are the tools of survivors."

And then the thing happened that still stabs me in the skull at night: I saw a tear. But not in the usual way. It didn't fall downward. It fell horizontally, sideways, like a drop giving gravity the finger. It hung in the air, hovering a heartbeat next to his face, round, shiny, outrageous. Ned stared, Conseil held his breath, I counted beats, 3-2-3, and the tear vibrated along, in the exact same rhythm. Then it drifted slowly forward until it tapped the edge of the slab. A soft "tic," nothing more. And it was gone. Nemo didn't blink once. "Family," he repeated. "Betrayal." And the boat hummed as if both had long since been bolted to the hull.

"Building," said Nemo, and the voice sounded as if it were running through a rusty pipe, sharp and dark. "Building is a vow." He took the logbook, opened it to a page, and showed it to no one but the slab. "Every beam is a sin, every bolt an oath." He spoke of a dock no one was allowed to see, of workers who never reappeared, of nights when metal hissed like flesh on hot coals. "They said screws belong to the king," he muttered. "I said screws belong to the one who forces them." Ned laughed dryly. "You didn't invent anything, old man. You only stole." Nemo turned his head as if he'd already planned for this. "Stealing is a form of justice when the world leaves you naked."

He drew lines on the table with his fingers, and I recognized the pattern: cracks, bulkhead after bulkhead, like a damned blueprint. "The Nautilus," he said, "is not a ship. She is my heart. And hearts don't beat for kings." Conseil mumbled numbers. "The measurements don't match the year." "Then the year is wrong," Nemo retorted, without a syllable of emotion. The record purred 3-2-3, as if delivering the amen. Outside hung only blackness. No shark, no wreck. Just us and his damned voice.

He went on talking: about debts he never paid, about loans made out of hate, about men he sent to their deaths with the promise of freedom. "They gave me steel," he said. "I gave them darkness." Ned bared his teeth. "And now you give us stories that stink." "I give you breath," Nemo replied, and the air gauges rose a millimeter, as if they had applauded. I felt my lungs hurt with rage. The boat vibrated, small, solemn, as if listening to the priest it had built for itself.

And then: the impossible. Condensation began to collect on the table, between the logbook and the locket. Not from our breaths, not from the glass—right there on the wood. First a dot, then a line, then a clean line creeping along the grain. A blueprint. Exactly where Nemo had drawn with his finger. A clean, wet line tracing the edges of the Nautilus, bulkhead by bulkhead, valve by valve. I saw it more clearly than any blueprint. Ned stared, Conseil gasped. Nemo didn't even see it. He knew. "It's holding because I want it to," he said. And the line dried of its own accord, as if it had never existed.

"Cross-examination," said Ned, but it sounded more like a fist than a word. He stood up, pushed the stool back so that its legs squeaked like rats. "You're spinning a fairy tale, Nemo. Three wars, five cities, eight lives—I don't buy any of them." His hands clenched, fists like two arguments that don't need grammar. Conseil raised his head, his eyes narrowed. "Are you telling or commanding?" he asked matter-of-factly. Nemo just raised his hand, and immediately the plate lowered its air a half beat. My lungs tightened, as if space had decided it now had more rights than we did. "I'll tell," said Nemo. "You question. And the sea decides what remains."

Ned banged on the table, the logbook shook, the locket clinked. "You said Valparaíso in the same breath as Brest, and the years are wrong, you dog!" Nemo smiled thinly. "Time is a rope. You hang it where it suits." "Bullshit," growled Ned. "Bullshit doesn't hang anywhere." Conseil had the chalk in his hand, drawing arrows on the edge of the table, marking: Year One, Year Two, Contradiction. "There are cracks," he said, "and I collect them." "Collect them," said Nemo. "They fill your grave." The plate cracked, work plus half, light down a little further, air squeezed out. Every breath was now a damned coin for

which we had to pay dearly. I heard my own heart like a timer, desperately trying to stay in 3-2-3.

"Tell the truth, or I'll rip your beard off," Ned snarled. Nemo stepped closer, no sound of shoe or cloth, only his gaze, cold, heavy, like a weight on his chest. "Ask the sea," he said, "it knows more than I do." Ned tried to strike, but Conseil was faster, grabbed his arm, pulled the rhythm back into his bones. "Not here, Ned. Not in his stomach." Ned gasped, his fists shaking, but he let go. For now. Nemo went back to the plate, put his fingers on the sliders. No one moved them. And yet, damn it, they buckled themselves: clack, clack, clack. Three clean, equal, flush. 3-2-3. Locked tight, as if an invisible hand had drawn the line. I felt the skin on my arms grow cold. Conseil made another cross with chalk. Ned cursed, a word that tasted of blood. Nemo looked at us as if we were footnotes. "The truth," he said quietly, "is already in the rhythm. You just have to listen."

The salon was crammed with his voice until there was no more room to breathe. Nemo stood there as if he had hired gravity. "That's it," he said, "questions end, course begins." He smoothed the medallion, laid it back as if it were merely a tool, not a wound. "You stay, or you'll become salt." Ned laughed ugly, the laugh of a man who's already considering which of his teeth he's going to knock out. Conseil wrote one last line on the table, which looked like a downward arrow. I remained silent, because words are useless when the record sets the time. 3-2-3, 3-2-3, like a judge who never stops working.

Outside, it happened: a shadow, huge, dark, not a shark, not a wreck. Something that seemed like a second Nautilus, only shorter in breath, broader in shoulders. It glided by, unhurried, unhurried, but close enough that the glass buzzed. Ned almost jumped. "Another one!" he yelled. Nemo didn't smile. "Mirror," he murmured. "Or hunters." No one asked any further questions. We stared until the shadow vanished like a poorly told lie.

A coin rolled out of the box on the table as if it had legs. It stopped on the glass, tipped, stood. And then—damn it—it stuck from the inside, without a hand, without spit, just like that. Shining in relief, a face on it none of us recognized. For a brief moment, it flickered. At first, it looked like some king. Then, in the slanted light, I saw my own stunned skull. Conseil saw Nemo. Ned saw only red. And I swore the boat grinned. The coin vibrated briefly to the beat—3-2-3—before it fell with a dull thud, stayed there, innocent. Nemo lifted the logbook, closed it like one closes a coffin. "Enough," he said. "The rest will come when you deserve it."

And we sat there, three idiots in the belly of a steel demon, while outside, maybe a twin, maybe an enemy, lurked in the darkness. I knew: we had just heard nothing but shit, served up neatly. But shit can warm you up when the pressure gets great enough.

Cigarettes in the storm

The storm took us like a damned piece of chewing gum, chewing, spitting, chewing again. The Nautilus was no longer a boat, it was a canned dog, thrown against the wall by the sea. The glass was blinded by spray, outside was nothing but gray on black, a painting drawn while drunk. Inside was the orchestra: crashing, creaking, howling, all jumbled together, as if a thousand idiots had discovered drums at once. The record skipped, stumbled, tipped over. 3-2-3, then 2-3-2, back again, as if it were vomiting. Every breath hurt because he didn't know whether he was swallowing air or salt.

Ned crouched with the cigarette in his mouth, lighter in his fist, as if he were about to slap the storm. A spark, a flicker, and damn it, it was burning. Smoke rose, bluish, sharp. "Fuck God, fuck Nemo, fuck the sea," he gasped, "I'll smoke until my lungs explode." Conseil counted the puffs, one, two, three, with a calm that annoyed even him. I had my cigarette between my lips, hands on the bulkhead, as if praying, but it was just a gesture to keep myself from throwing up. Nemo stood in the corner, no lighter, no smoke, just this damned calm that was heavier than any blow from outside.

The smoke didn't hang normally. It didn't creep upwards, it rolled sideways, as if the storm had dispossessed us of our direction even here. A ring detached itself from Ned's mouth, danced across the room, suspended in midair, vibrating to the boat's beat. 3-2-3. A floating circle of nicotine, staring at us like an eye. Ned laughed dryly. "See, asshole," he spat toward the deck, "even the cigarette butts know we're not going down." Conseil wrote a four in the air. I took a drag on my cigarette, smoke burning my lungs, and thought: Maybe he's right. Maybe we really are already dead and this is just the last cigarette in the waiting room.

We made religion out of cheap tobacco. One lit a cigarette, the next held his hand in slipstream, the third cursed the smoke back into shape. The air was like a windowless bar, full of breath that has told too many stories. Each puff was a coin you toss into the storm's mouth, hoping it will give you a moment's rest. The record kept throwing us in circles: 3-2-3, then 2-3-2 again, like a drunk who

swears he's walking while kissing the wall. The glass was blind, the lamps flickered, and each flicker was a mini-cardiac arrest. I held the cigarette between my teeth like a promise I couldn't keep anyway. The first puff cut, the second burned, the third briefly turned me into a person who says: just one more minute.

Ned smoked as if he wanted to ignite a new home with every spark. The embers pumped in his face, red, angry, a beacon for idiots who run straight ahead, insulted, in a storm. "More," he growled, and wordlessly I handed him one. Conseil counted silently, lips moving numbers like prayers. "Five," he whispered finally, "you're at five in two minutes." "Then give me the six," Ned gasped, "before the priest locks the door." Conseil flicked ash into a tin bowl that danced on the floor as if it had its own knee. "Strokes equal to bars," he murmured. "Three short, two short, three long." He held his hand over the filter, feeling the pulse of the embers. "Do you hear it?" "I hear I'm alive," Ned said. "That's enough."

The others joined in. Hands that usually turn valves now held sticks of poison with reverence. One of the silent screw believers took a long drag, pursed his lips, and blew a thin stream against the storm in his stomach. Another held his cigarette as if it might run away from him. The boat jerked, you could hear it even in your teeth. Above us, a rib creaked like an old back remembering past sins. Somewhere, a screw sang, that thin note that stabs you in the head and stays there even when you hit it. I leaned against the bulkhead and sucked until my lungs showed me the payoff. The nicotine did what it always does: It promised an order that isn't there.

"You see," coughed Ned, "that's how you stay human. Not this damn machine breathing." He kicked the casing of the record player. It responded with an offended tremble. 3-2-3. "Leave the organ alone," I said, "or it'll play us a song we don't know." Conseil lit a fresh one for me, lighting it with the hands of a nurse. "Rule one," he whispered, "always leave one burning when the lamps are wobbly." "Rule two," wheezed Ned, "always curse when the god doesn't shine." Nemo stood at the edge of the light, without a cigarette, without interest in our little hells. He didn't need smoke. He was the smoke that doesn't need a smell to creep into your eyes.

The room suddenly had a pulse. Not just from the boat, not just from us. The cigarettes began to breathe in time. No joke: embers on, embers off, simultaneously, as if they had a conductor we couldn't see. Three short flares in chorus, two short ones, then a longer burning one that made the tips red like little evil suns. One of the sailors gave a stifling laugh. "This is crazy." "That's

physics with a sense of humor," I gasped. Conseil shook his head. "This is the record that makes friends." Ned took another drag, letting the smoke whistle through his teeth, an offended organ. "If the boat is my grave, I want it to stink of tobacco."

Spray seeped through some crack into the saloon like an offended cat, landing on our sleeves and foreheads. Drops beaded on the embers, hissing briefly, but with less power than they thought. Sparks jumped, little stray shooting stars that no one wished for. The Nautilus curtsied crookedly, the floor changed direction, and we followed like poor dancers. I felt my head begin to read the plumes of smoke: one line means stay, two lines mean hold on, three lines mean you're lying. "If I'm making it up," I thought, "it still helps."

Then Ned's cigarette did something that goes against manuals, priests, and mothers. The ember didn't move forward. It moved backward. Not fast, not spectacularly. It ate its way from the cigarette stem back toward the filter, in bursts, in 3-2-3, as if the storm were synchronizing it with us. Ned held it out in front of him, eyes narrowed, ready to thrash the world if it laughs. "Come on, become a torch," he hissed. The ember reached the filter, smoldered there for a breath, without igniting it, without stench, just red, silent, defiant—and lasted. Two ends burned simultaneously: tip normal, filter like a second mouth. Nothing charred, nothing stank. A damned double morning in the mouth of a man who never gets up early. Conseil whispered, "Impossible," and the storm nodded, as if to say: only today.

Ned was now a knife without a sheath. He stood up, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, and started walking, not quickly, but so that every screw knew there was going to be a fight. "Up," he said, as if it were a god. "Up. Air. Out." The storm slammed us sideways, the Nautilus sliding like a drunken bull on tiles. The deck did its vomit waltz, jumping 3-2-3, tumbling 2-3-2, and every hand felt like a finger in the eye. Ned reached for the ladder to the overhead walkway, grabbed the first rung, and the whole ship told him how shitty his idea was: a deep crack in the bulkhead, a metallic "leave it" that you feel in your back. "If you touch that door, we'll eat salt," I said. "I'm salt," he growled, and the smoke poured out of him like a long-practiced insult.

Conseil clung to him, a damned safety belt with a voice. "Pull eight," he whispered in his ear, "two more and you'll fall over." "Then give me eleven," said Ned, "so I'll fall over with style." The boat hit a wave coming from inside; we flew half a meter, landed badly, and someone laughed because crying didn't have a credit line right now. Nemo stood there like a coffin you don't want to carry, doing nothing. His hands hung still, but the record obeyed, as if he'd only

thought: "Work plus a quarter." I felt it in my diaphragm, in the back of my neck, in my sentence structure. The light flickered in a huff, didn't go out, but pretended to. "He's steering with silence," I said. "He's steering with our oxygen," Ned snarled, "and with my nerves."

The smoke was now thick as soup. Cigarettes glowed in unison, little red heartbeats that didn't ask for permission. Each flare was a command: stop, breathe, lie. I took a deep drag, that miserable, cheap prayer, and thought nicotine was the only thing that hadn't betrayed us yet. Outside, the glass was nothing but a gray skull. No image, just violence. The Nautilus creaked as if lots of very capable dwarves were running saws through our nerves. Ned put his foot on the second rung. Conseil counted: "Nine." "Ten." "Eleven." Ned stopped, not because he was obeying, but because the storm briefly lent him his spine and then took it away again. He breathed, flushed, grinned. "I'll go," he said. "Who's coming with me?" "Me and your ghost," I said. "It carries less weight."

Below, a tin bowl rattled across the planks, the ash inside creating little moonscapes that crumbled and reinvented themselves with each blow. A sailor pulled on the mouthpiece as if playing an organ, blowing the smoke along the ladder to make Ned think in clouds instead of anger. "You're not out when you're up," Conseil said quietly, "you're just wetter." "I want wetter with a view," Ned growled. He reached for the latch. The boat gave that nasty, short hop, like a muscle spasm from hell, and he missed by the width of a curse. I laughed. He laughed too, out of spite. "Fucking tin fish," he said tenderly, "just the two of us."

The plate rattled once, then acted like nothing had happened. 3-2-3, like a judge with a toothache. Nemo turned his head an inch, no more, and suddenly the air was finer, tighter, the kind that tells you: smoke faster or not at all. I did both. The filter stuck to my lip, salt on skin, salt in sentence. The storm outside kicked the wall, again, again, as if it had misplaced the key. I felt the boat beneath me like an animal that hates us all but wears the right collar. "Come on down," I said to Ned. "Light me first," he said. I lit him. The spark jumped, the embers gathered speed, and I thought we were the dumbest candlesticks in the world.

He stood for another beat, two, three. Then he let go of the rung, not because he'd come to his senses, but because the storm briefly stole his knees. He didn't fall—the boat set him down like an unwilling butler. "Coward," he muttered to the ladder. "Tomorrow," said the ladder, "you'll still be here." Conseil put a tick in the air, an invisible check mark next to "still alive," and I

would have kissed his forehead for that, if I weren't confusing smoking with breathing.

The ash on Ned's cigarette butt was too long, a gray finger that tried to fall and forgot. He flicked—missed—flicked again. The ash came loose, fell an inch, and then simply stayed there. Not to smoke, not to air, not to logic. A small, crooked stalactite of dirt that refused to know gravity. It vibrated slightly, in a 3-2-3, like a pendulum curse. Ned stared at it as if someone had insulted him. "Well," he said harshly, "the ash stays, but I'll stay too." The ash nodded. Or the storm. I didn't care. It stayed.

Conseil made science out of our misery. He clamped the cigarette between his teeth without dragging, just to keep his hands free, and drew chalk lines on the wet metal, as if the boat were a shitty blackboard. "Grids," he said, "so the madness has fields." Four lines, five, six, his fingers cold, the chalk offended, but he slid anyway, because even matter sometimes respects people who don't complain. Each line vibrated, 3-2-3, as if the lines themselves were breathing. "You and your mathematics," Ned wheezed, "all I need are the pieces you can throw." "Throwing comes later," Conseil replied, "now we count."

He set the tin cup in the middle of the field, stuffed it with a wet rag to stop it from bouncing, and tapped the corners like a priest blessing the house even though no one opens the door. "Blazing spots," he murmured. "Sit on them." No one laughed because no one wanted to waste any more air. We held our cigarettes over the intersections. The storm lashed, the Nautilus groaned, but for three breaths the world stood still enough that the tips turned red like little traffic lights, each on its own damn cross. "One," he counted, "two, three." He dropped the numbers as if they had gravity. "Now in push-pull." We pulled short, short, long, and the record acted as if it had invented it. 3-2-3, clean, defiant, like a dog that only whistles at one, and that's not God.

Spray whipped through the open nothingness somewhere beyond the bulkhead, leaving salt rims on our cheeks, making me older and more honest. The lamp above us flickered, feigning death and then breaking it off, out of politeness perhaps. The smoke crept across the grid, clinging to the lines, thick, gray threads that refused to be diagonal. I've never seen air obey; today it obeyed a man in a wet jacket. "You see, Ned," I said, "order, even for our lungs." "My lungs hate order," he growled, "but they hate drowning more." He set the embers on another intersection as if shifting ships, and muttered, "Queen beats king," and spat ash onto his deserved knee.

"Moves equal time," said Conseil. "Ten moves for five minutes. After that, your head goes dumb." "My head was dumb before," Ned retorted, "that's why I'm here in the first place." He gave a short laugh, that dry, broken joke of a man who needs no punchline. The boat made the big swerve that sends everything the wrong way. The grid held. The chalk made a noise like teeth on glass. I thought of all the books that never explain why people start drawing lines in the middle of a storm. Because lines are the only goddamn fences you can build yourself while your house is burning.

Conseil placed his hand flat on the plate for a moment, as if bribing it. "Go with me," he whispered. "Just a little." And the thing went with me. Air a touch up, work a touch down, light remained an offended yellow. The storm didn't bend its back, but it looked briefly. "Thank you," said Conseil to the metal, and the metal pretended not to be pleased. Ned twisted his mouth. "If you start thanking screws, the next thing you'll marry is a valve." "Only if it's listening," said Conseil. He was serious. He was always serious when he was talking to a wall.

The embers on our grid began to talk to each other. No blinking, no circus. Just those dirty little heartbeats, waiting for each other so no one burns alone. Three short ones, two short ones, one longer one. You could feel it, like a faint bass in a wall behind which people you don't like are dancing. A sailor with hands like palettes set his cigarette on a corner and didn't drag, just so the dot would stay lit. Another shaded his hand so the wind in his stomach wouldn't fuck up anything that was still warm. I held mine so the smoke traced the exact chalk cut, like a finger tracing a scar.

"Now the drops," said Conseil, crazy enough to be right. He pointed to the sight glass: blind, scarred, but not deaf. "When they walk, we count their steps." I had to laugh, despite the salt in my lungs. "The drops have feet, of course." "Today, they do." He was right. A wet sawtooth line ran along the inside of the glass, not down, not up—across. It jumped from intersection to intersection, precisely mirrored on our grid, as if the storm outside had the chalk in its head and wanted to show us that it could paint, too. Ned stared. "If the boat wants to play tricks on me, at least it should pay." "It'll pay with you," said Conseil. "Every order costs blood."

I pulled, counted, pulled, counted, my lungs did math, my fingers waged war. The Nautilus dropped us off again at another spot, polite as an executioner adjusting his stool. Someone behind me cursed in a language I didn't recognize. The smoke pushed across the field, stuck at an intersection, grew thicker, darker, almost black. "Too much," said Conseil, tapping my hand. I took the

cigarette back a finger's breadth, and the smoke faded to gray again. It was ridiculous how much this calmed me. A ridiculous, cheap, eight-second peace feeling that every church has been trying to sell for centuries and never quite manages to deliver.

"Now backward," said Conseil, "short—short—long—long—short." We did it. The record did it with us, not quite, but enough that you thought it could feel. Ned blew the last puff through his teeth as if belching in a cop's face. "I need something to hate that doesn't hate itself," he said. "Take me," said the storm, and hammered on the wall again. The lamp went out for a second, two, four, then back on, offended, like a waitress you call too often. I heard my blood in my ear. I heard the chalk scratching. I heard the ass of the world giggling.

And then the smoke did something I won't tell any doctor who wants to keep his job. The embers left the cigarettes. Not far. Only a thumb's breadth. They hung over the intersections, free, red, fleshless, little burning coins that had forgotten they needed something to burn. Our butts continued to glow, good, but the actual hearts—they floated in the grid, exactly on the intersections, as if someone had wiped away gravity with a rag. Three short flickers, two, one long one. Ned whispered a "Holy—" and broke off. Conseil raised his hand as if to touch one, didn't, for the only wise reason that remains: fear of what works. The embers stayed for a beat, two, three—then they fell back into the cigarettes simultaneously, without ash, without spark, as if someone were taking back their name. And the grid on the floor was dry, though I could swear I'd just seen it dripping.

Nemo said nothing, making more noise than the storm. He stood at the edge of the light, shoulders steady, hands without gesture, and yet the panel listened to him like a priest who's just leaning the door ajar. The boat tilted, not much, just the kind that sorts your guts out, and I knew he hadn't touched anything—except the world. Spray rubbed against the bulkhead, the glass a blackboard full of wrong answers written by the wind with wet fingers. The smoke clung to our lips, our eyelids, our ears, everywhere, and yet the room smelled of him: of metal, of electricity, of something that doesn't have a name yet because no one has survived long enough to invent it. Ned stared over, his cigarette a dagger; he wanted the man to finally flinch. "Steer the thing out of hell or get out of here," he gasped. Nemo didn't blink. He was a lighthouse without light: only mass that tells you which way is up.

The Nautilus lurched, leaped into a wall of water, and the bones of the structure clacked like scorpions praying in a tin can. I held on to the frame, the frame didn't hold me back, and we made it through anyway. Conseil drew air

on the pressure gauge with two fingers, as if he could beckon it; the needle obeyed a millimeter, out of pity or scorn. "He's breathing for us," he whispered, meaning the machine, meaning the man, meaning the whole thing. Ned laughed, a short, wooden bark. "If he'll breathe for me, he might as well swallow the ashes." He flicked, missed, flicked again, the spark flying through the room like an evil thought and extinguished exactly where Nemo's shoe toe wasn't.

The smoke now took paths no one had authorized. It wrapped itself around the dampers like scarves, crept up the ladder like a thief clearing out his own apartment, and came back down again at the same moment, as if it had realized there was no furniture upstairs. Every flash at the tips was a time signature, short—short—long, then short—short—long again, good, spiteful, like a choir in a city that's burning. Nemo didn't need a cigarette. He needed nothing. He stood there, pressing the wrinkles out of the storm with his mere silence. One deflection, two, intercepted. The record growled in approval. 3–2–3 became a line you could put a knife to.

"Give him here," Ned said suddenly, tugging at the air as if he could pluck the silence from the man's throat. "Give me your God." No answer. Only his gaze, cool as silverware and twice as honest. I sucked on my stub until the world shrank an inch, wishing for a lie good enough to lure us away from him. Nothing came. Only this pressure on the ribs, this polite knee in the lungs. Conseil tapped the chalk on the board, very quietly, three times: one—two—three. The room nodded. The lamp above us stopped flickering, not because it wanted to, but because something greater had decided that flickering was not allowed now.

It was the moment I understood: He's smoking us. Not tobacco. Us. Our puffs, our curses, our little red heartbeats at the tips—he drew them in, without a mouth, without lungs, just with that accursed gravity of will. The smoke turned toward him, not much, just enough to make you hate it. It didn't flow; he decided. Ned raised his fist, half-lowered it, raised it again, a gesture without a goal. "Come here, you cold king," he said, "I'll blow you out." Nemo didn't move his hand. He didn't need it. The boat was his hand.

And then, damn it, the world did that little thing that knows no repair: On the glass wall, in its shadow, a hand lifted. His hand—but not his. The shadow before him raised a cigarette to his mouth, though his fingers were empty. No ember, no paper, just darkness on glass. The shadow inhaled. All our tips shortened a fraction in the same breath, cleanly, simultaneously, as if someone had stolen our drag. The shadow blew out. A ring, black on black, wrapped

itself around the room for a heartbeat, hanging nowhere, having nowhere to go—and passed as if it had never existed. Nemo didn't move. The record hummed 3-2-3. And the storm took a step back, just one, like a man who realizes he's just bursting into the wrong story.

The crack announced itself like a toothache from the bulkhead: first blunt, then sharp, then personal. A blow from outside, slanting, mean, and somewhere behind the plate, metal made that thin "tic" that everyone hates and no one wants to identify. A second, a third. Then came the water. Not a flood, not heroic—an offended jet, as thick as a pencil in a hurry. It shot from a crack under the stairs, cut a cold thread across the room, struck the tin bowl, made the ash inside bloom like gray flowers, and made us all realize how small our cigarettes are when the world decides to drink. The storm outside roared yes, the Nautilus growled no, and we were in between, human filth with embers on our lips.

"Rag! Tar!" yelled one of the screw-believers, and his voice was the most honest instrument in the room. Ned jumped forward, ripping open a bucket that smelled of the century, of ship's doctor and sin. The tar was thick as guilt, but it came when you cursed it. Conseil was already on his knees, chalk in his fist, no time for grids, only arrows, fat and ugly, pointing from the crack to the print, from the print to the plate, from the plate to Nemo: here, here, here. I pressed my heel against the tin bowl to stop it from practicing its dance, and smelled my own nervous burn. The water took no notice. It whipped, pulsed, 3-2-3, as if the ocean were mocking us by singing in unison.

Nemo was still standing, of course he was. An inch of head, a touch of shoulder, and the plate did what we hate it for: air up, work down, light on that humiliating yellow in which everything fails, but properly. "Relieve pressure," he said, not loudly, not quickly, just so the engine heard. A man on the auxiliary winch cranked backward, two teeth, three, the Nautilus gave a half-sigh, as if it were taking a knee. The water hissed angrily, as if its favorite enemy had just escaped. Ned knelt by the jet, smearing tar with the flat of his hand, cursing letters I haven't read in years. "Hold still, you cold snake," he gasped, and of course the jet didn't hold still. It cut through the tar like sausage and squirted salt into my teeth.

"Counterpressure!" cried Conseil, "give me a second hand!" I was there before my body knew what it was for. We pressed the rag into the tar, pressed the tar into the wound, pressed the wound into the hull. It wasn't heroism. It was the ugly craft of sealing, where you beg the world not to watch for a minute. The stream thinned, slid sideways, bit into my fingertips—cold, sharp, as if the sea

had grown little teeth. I bit back with what I had: growl, push, don't think. Ned tore a second sheet of tar, pressed it on, pushed my hand away so he could sacrifice his. "Hold," I said. "I'll hold." "More." "I'll hold more."

Above us, the storm broke again; the light wobbled, the lamp threatened to die, forcing us to postpone the plan. Someone yelled, "Power!", something clicked on the switchboard, and the world decided it wasn't going to grill us for the time being. The smoke turned wet, plastered our faces, the cigarettes howled in offense, as if they had rights. The plate sputtered briefly into 2-3-2, found its back, and bravely went to 3-2-3, as if it had a guardian. Nemo took half a step closer, didn't kneel, didn't help, but the Nautilus pretended his hand was on ours. The pressure dropped a fraction, exactly enough to lie: It'll be okay. It'll be okay.

"Wedge!" I screamed, "I need a fucking wedge!" A fist shoved wood into my fingers—not pretty, not fitting, just wood on purpose. I rammed it against the edge, felt the boat recoil like a living thing. Ned came with the hook, hooked it over, and made an ugly, honest clamp out of wood, tar, and wrist. Conseil tied the whole mess off with a line that smelled of harbor, murmuring knot names like prayers no one ever checks: bowline, clapboard, whatever, as long as it holds. The jet became a thread, the thread a drop, the drop a reminder. I only let go when my fingers wouldn't stop holding. "Yet," said Ned. "Now," said Conseil. "Enough," said the boat with a dull, satisfied sound that I never want in my head again.

We all sank down on our asses at once, out of courtesy to the blood. The tar glistened, black like an idea that belongs to no one. The water was still running, but so meekly it was almost embarrassing. Ned snorted on his cigarette—yes, it was still burning, of course it was still burning, that useless little queen—and blew smoke in my face that smelled of victory, if there is such a thing. "Tell me," he coughed. "Hero?" "Asshole," I said, and we were as agreed as two men who hadn't just died could be.

And then the thing that no poetry likes happened: the thread of water, which a moment ago had been making drops, stood upright. Not much, only a finger's length. It stood. Stood, upright, trembling in 3-2-3, as if it had learned how we breathe, and acted as if it were a small, clear candle. No gravity, no logic, just a gossamer, still stream that doesn't fall, doesn't flow, doesn't freeze—it stays. Ned held out his hand, drew it back, as if he'd pulled on a wire he couldn't see. "I'm not touching this," he muttered. "Not today." Conseil counted "one, two, three," and on the third stroke, the thread obediently lay down, became an

honest drop, plopped down on the tar, and disappeared, as if it had never decided to have an opinion.

The echo wasn't a song, just the dry panting of an animal that had decided to let us live today after all. The Nautilus straightened its back, as far as steel could possibly call something "straight." The storm outside continued to thrash, but it sounded a tone lower, as if someone had pulled out a piece of its tooth. We sat in the wet like wet dogs who'd learned to only tremble when no one was looking. The tar glistened black and proud; our fingers glistened too, but less proudly. The cigarettes grew shorter, the space grew longer, and somewhere between the two lay a calm that looked like a trap.

Ned breathed in the stub as if it were a friend you only visit in the hospital. "Everything that burns is honest," he said hoarsely. "We too," I replied, and my cough nodded in agreement. Conseil wrote numbers in the dirt, short, cowardly numbers that pretended to be proof. "Twenty-four moves per man in eight minutes," he muttered, "that's too many, but it held us up." "Holding is another word for dying later," Ned growled, then smiled anyway, that short, crooked thing that looks like courage and smells of tiredness. In the corner, salt still dripped from a crease somewhere, no longer like a knife, more like a clock with poor timing.

Nemo stood closer than I liked, and farther away than Ned could bear. His hands were open, empty, but the room acted as if he had placed them on our throats. "Enough," he said simply. No praise, no liturgy. The record nodded, 3-2-3, and released a trace of air, just enough for the lungs to decide to go along for a while longer. The light remained an offended yellow, work crept toward "later." One heard the little sounds again: screw sings, rivet coughs, wood remembers. The sharks outside, if they were still there, said nothing. Maybe they were on break, maybe they were listening. Maybe the sea was just lying in its corner like a boxer, grinning through its blood.

We collected the stubs as if they were evidence in a trial no one would win. Ned stacked five next to each other, then six, then pushed them toward an arrow pointing at the ladder. "Tomorrow," he said. "Not today," Conseil said, and it didn't sound like pleas, but like mathematics. I bled my last embers out over the edge. A tiny spark leaped off, danced on the tar—and stayed there, small, red, defiant, without oxygen, without reason. It lasted for three beats, exactly in time, and then went out as if someone had flicked the universe with two fingers. I swore I heard him laugh, that fine, evil chuckle of things that simply shouldn't and yet do so anyway.

The glass cleared for a breath, just one, as if the storm had briefly lifted its hand from his throat. And behind the smeared, scarred pane passed the kind of view that later keeps you awake at night: not wave, not shadow, not phosphorus. A back, flat and long, too close, too big to be just water. Not a shark, not a ship. A moving wall that had a will of its own. It brushed past the face of the Nautilus, slowly, with that impudence that only things that never pay can. The glass hummed, deeply, tenderly, as if it knew his name. Ned stood, not knowing why. "Storm?" he asked. "Or what came with him?" I asked. Nemo said nothing, and that was precisely the answer I didn't want.

In the room itself, physics played one last bad joke: The ash from Ned's arrow didn't rise, it didn't fall; it went the wrong way. A gray, twisted streak detached itself from the pile, crawled up the ladder like a tired ghost, stuck to the third rung, and vibrated in 3-2-3, as if sending us the Morse code for "Not yet." It lasted for three beats, then crumbled into dust that rained down, never having time to belong anywhere along the way.

We breathed. We pretended we'd decided to breathe again. The storm outside was thinking. Inside, Conseil counted the cracks that weren't on the drawing. Ned whispered "tomorrow" as if it were an insult. Nemo turned away. And the Nautilus, that cold queen, hummed her shitty basic beat again: 3-2-3, 3-2-3, like a heart that can hate you and still pump you.

Death and cheap whiskey

We found him by the stairs, swept there by a blow that didn't match any wave. A thin fellow with palette-like hands that usually held chains, now empty, open, useless. Skin colorless like drowned chalk. He breathed, but only his mouth knew how; his chest had long since given up. The boat pushed him to our feet as if it had decided to pay the bill in cash today. The smell came first: tar, iron, a sweet edge of blood that eats away at all honor. The Nautilus vibrated its damned beat, 3-2-3, as if death were just another cog; and every time

someone whispered, "He's gone," a needle slipped briefly from its track, 2-3-2, as if the boat had learned to blink briefly.

"Up with him," said Nemo, not loudly, but the metal listened. We propped him up on two boxes that had been acting as coffins yesterday and had already had a chance to practice today. Conseil was the priest without a church: rags, spirits, needles, thread, hands with patience that he had traded somewhere, back before he learned how steel lies. Ned stood beside him, his jaw a vise; he needed a deed, and the world wouldn't give him one, so he demanded a bottle. "Whiskey," he growled, "for the wound. For my throat. For me." Nemo looked at him like a scale that never touches zero. "For the wound," he said. "Not for your courage." He let his gaze fall to the plate, and the air slumped with his hat, just enough so that every breath was a damned application.

The guy—Borel, I remembered, Borel with the silvery scar on his ear—made that nasty little noise when the body pauses briefly to watch its demise. "Not yet," Conseil told him, as if it were a valve. He washed, he sewed, neatly, quickly, as if you could stab time after it and it would stay. I held the light, the yellow, insulting one that flatters every lie. Ned twisted the cork, bit it open, spat it out like a tooth. The whiskey smelled of medicine, cheaper than a white lie, sharp as a true accusation. "Just spoons," said Nemo, and his hand pushed a brass spoon into the picture, as if he were a judge with a gavel that was too small. Ned poured, one drop, two, too many—"Enough," Nemo snapped, and the drop obeyed, because today everything I hated obeyed.

I drank first, not because I was allowed to, but because anger needs a throat. It burned like an ungodly prayer. My tongue became a beast that will never be tamed. I passed the cup, Borel got a sip, he choked, the sip came again, half outside, half inside; his gaze sought a place where water does not dwell. "Stay," said Conseil. "Go," whispered Ned. Nemo said nothing, and that was worse because his silence held the door. The record made that subtle, false nod, 3-2-3, as if you could conduct lives if you just sang the right number.

Borel's hands twitched. I saw the palm ridges, black lines that speak of work that never makes a newspaper. His fingers grasped the air as if ripening it like fruit. "One more," said Ned, raising the bottle. "For the wound," repeated Nemo, and the spoon stood between them like a brief war. I held Borel's head. It was heavy, but not in a good way. The good way about heads is: they carry plans. This one carried only salt water and a few final lies that no one wanted to buy anymore. Conseil finished sewing, pursed his lips as if trying to hold the stitches with his mouth. "Press here." I pushed. "More." I pushed harder, until my fingers told me I'd become part of a bulkhead.

In the glass, the world briefly brightened. No wonder, only the storm subsided to catch its breath for the next kick. "He's leaving," said someone who never speaks, and because he said it, I believed it. Ned tipped the rest of the glass down his throat, the bottle swinging back as if it wanted to dance. "Cheap," he said, and the word sounded like a judgment on us all. "Cheap burns better," I retorted. Nemo raised a hand, and the air became half a breath more generous. It wasn't mercy. It was administration.

Borel's eyes widened for that one last stupid moment when humans think they're greater than mechanics. His lips formed something that might have been a name, might have just been a curse. I bent down, pretending I could steal the letters from his mouth. Nothing. Only the taste of iron from my own tongue. I looked at the sight glass, out of reflex, as if there were something out there that wasn't laughing. The glass sweated, thin drops that needed no instructions. And then shit did what it shouldn't: The condensation collected, contracted, stretched sideways. Letters. No coincidence, no whim. BORE L. A crooked, wet script, exactly on par with our misery. It paused for a breath, just long enough for Ned to whisper it and Conseil to count it and me to hate it because she was right. Then the next impact against the hull ripped the letters into harmless rain. Borel exhaled. The record twitched, 2–3–2, as if nodding to death, which never asks for permission.

Conseil made a hospital out of dirt. He boiled water in a dented kettle that looked as if it had already cured pirates' fevers. Spirit, gauze, a needle in the corner of his mouth like a small, stubborn dagger. He rubbed Borel's skin with the severity that says: If you die, do it clean. "Disinfect," he muttered, "so Death can't say we invited him." He poured spirit on the seam, the smell biting and burning, and told the gods to piss off. I held the light lower, a yellow judgment on too much flesh. Borel was gone and yet there, a body with a remaining rent. Ned stood over us with the bottle like a poor statue that no one had paid for. "Give it here," he growled, "my throat's a wound too." Nemo held out the spoon, brass, small, meanness in metal form. “Measure it,” he said, “otherwise no one will breathe.”

The argument didn't fit through the door, so it escalated. "He's either dead or he isn't," Ned snarled, "and both need more than a spoonful." "The wound needs," said Nemo, "your head doesn't." I saw Ned's jaw working like an engine without oil. He raised the bottle, I saw the dent in his neck that speaks of too many bad lays. Cut-off. Medicinal. Burns honestly, lies afterward. Conseil nodded at me, and we did what hands do when words are too stupid: hold, press, wipe, cut. The needle went in like a prayer, came out like a curse. I wished I had a third hand. I wished I had a different heart. I got neither.

"One sip," said Nemo, and his tone of voice allowed nothing but that it should happen. Ned tipped, the spoon taking just enough to wet a child's mouth. "For whom?" he snarled. "For the wound," Nemo answered, and I hated how fitting the sentence was. Conseil dipped gauze in spirit, rubbing and stitching, his fingers a metronome, playing the 3-2-3 beat with contempt. The boat hummed; it was his prayer rug. I lifted Borel's head, heavy as a sack of broken promises. The whiskey touched his lip, disappeared. No gurgle, no thanks. Just a small twitch that refused to have any meaning.

The crew stood in a semicircle, a choir of sordid saints, each with a story no one wants to hear anymore. One wept quietly, pretending it was sweat. Another prayed, but his lips moved to the rhythm of work, not to the rhythm of heaven. One stole with his eyes. He was already weighing the bottle in his mind, shoving time into pockets that didn't exist. Nemo saw everything. He saw in such a way that you felt caught even though you weren't moving. "Ration," he said, and I knew he didn't just mean the whiskey. He meant light, he meant air, he meant tired hearts. The plate obeyed in millimeters. Air down a notch, work up a notch, light the same. Management of despair.

"One more," said Ned, and the "one more" was a knife. "For me." "For my hands," corrected Nemo, and I had to admit: his hands were shaking. Ned exhaled a laugh that felt like a toothache. He tipped the spoon again, brass clinking on the rim of the glass, a small, hollow church gong. I took the bottle from him a breath too soon; he pulled it back a breath too late; in the middle, the world poured a drop next to it. The drop bounced on my skin, didn't run, burned. I smelled poverty in this stuff, I smelled pharmacy, I smelled port. "Cheap," said Ned, as if he meant me. "Cheap burns longer," I admitted, and my voice didn't recognize me.

Conseil continued sewing, neatly, strictly, religiously. "Eight stitches," he murmured, "ten, twelve." He counted as if accounting for death. "Knot," he said, "pull." I pulled. The thread sang a short, offended note. "Bandage." I wrapped. "More spirit." I poured. The alcohol sought a way in that I wouldn't allow. The smell turned the salon into an emergency room from which no one is discharged. Borel's breath—if that's what it was—came like a false promise: shallow, too fast, too late. "Hold him," Conseil said. "What for?" "Because you hold on as long as you hold on." "Well said," Ned growled, "well useless."

Nemo took the world from us in rations. "One spoon for the stitches," he said, "one for the courage of the hands." He handed Conseil the spoon, and Conseil did something that told the man he was now on duty: He took it. He dipped it not into the cup, but against the lip of the bottle, as if to minimize the

sloppiness. Ned tried to knock it out of his hand. I held Ned's hand tightly, my fingers in his wrist like clamps in bad wood. "Later," I whispered. "Later there's a dog," he spat, "who doesn't recognize you." "Then give him your hand to smell." "He'll eat it." "He should." We looked at each other, two animals who, out of boredom, don't tear each other apart.

"Again," said Nemo calmly, and what could the machine do? It did. The spoon hit the rim of the glass, that little metallic "ting" that's enough to make you hate you for life. I stayed still, the room stayed still, even the storm outside put its hand to its forehead for a moment. Ned just cursed with his eyes. Conseil brought the spoon to the seam, let a drop fall onto Borel's skin as if administering a host backward. Borel didn't flinch. Maybe he didn't remember. Maybe the wound has more memory than he does. "Band on," said Conseil. "Band's on," I said. We talked like people who convince themselves there's still something left when the shelf is already empty.

I felt my throat demanding that I stare at the bottle longer than was healthy. The whiskey inside wasn't golden, it was the brown residue of stories better left undone. Ned had long since held it fresh in his hand, like an argument he'd win later. "I share," he grumbled. "You steal," Nemo corrected. "Sharing is stealing with applause." "And ordering is lying with a uniform." Ned grinned humorlessly. The crew ducked their heads as if someone were about to throw a god. I felt the pushers breathing, those three little judges. Air/Light/Work: the last three saints left on duty when everyone else is drunk.

Borel's hand twitched, grasping at nothing, yet holding it anyway. I placed my hand in his empty gesture, just so the world might briefly believe it wasn't as pointless as it was. "Done," said Conseil, and tied the stitches so tightly I could hear my own pulse in them. "It's either he or she goes," he added, "all we can do now is count." Ned raised the bottle. I saw in his gaze a door that said: now. Nemo saw the same door and sealed it with a word that sounded like a number. "Spoons." Ned growled deeply. "You give me spoons, I'll give you fists." "You give me fists, I'll cut off your air supply." Not a threat. An instruction manual.

And then the impossible happened, so quietly that I only later realized how loud it was. Nemo moved the spoon over the cup, brass against glass, a breath that made a racket inside me. At that moment, right in the metallic kiss, the air pointer jerked back. Not a tremble, not a slip. A clean backward tick, as if someone were pulling its nose. For a heartbeat, it stood in "before," offended, then it moved forward again, good, dutiful, as if it had apologized for the faux pas. "Did you—" Ned began. "Yes," said Conseil. I nodded. Nemo didn't look at

the pointer. He didn't need to. The spoon dripped into the seam, and the Nautilus pretended it hadn't noticed. Lie in brass. Order in metal. And we, we breathed, because the pointer wouldn't grant us the way back.

We turned the saloon into a morgue without a priest. No psalms, just teeth playing with their tongues because speaking was useless. Borel lay on his two crates, his shoulder bandaged, his mouth half-open, as if listening to a joke he no longer understood. Conseil had closed his eyes just so the light wouldn't be offended. The crew stood in a semicircle, their rows as tight as bad thoughts. One held a piece of gauze over his nose as if he could filter out death with it. Another rubbed his sleeve until the salt gave up. Nemo placed the bottle in the middle of the bench, not as an invitation, more as an interrogation.

"For the wound," he said again, his voice as dry as invoice paper. Ned snarled. "For the throat. For the nerves. For the man." He slammed the flat of his hand on the bench, making the cup bounce like a cowardly dog. "We drink to him. We drink to us. We drink to no one being stupid enough to stand here tomorrow." Conseil raised two fingers. "One per man. Spoons. After that, hands off." "I'll piss on spoons," Ned growled, "and on your finger count, too." I held the bottle tightly as if holding an argument on a leash. It felt heavy, like regret.

"Mugs," said Nemo. His men handed forward two tin mugs, dented, honest. The edges bore bites from bad nights. Ned reached, tipped, the whiskey ran like rusty tea. I smelled pharmacy and harbor. Cheap, yes, but with the kind of truth that burns your throat and then tells you what you still owe. "He first," said Conseil, pointing at Borel. "He can't do it anymore," growled Ned. "Then we for him." "Then we for him," I repeated, because sentences are sometimes like screws—you screw them in until they hold.

We raised our cups, all embarrassingly ridiculously serious; one made the sign of the cross, missing the forehead. Another muttered, "Good man," and didn't even have a name ready. "Borel," I said, just so the air wouldn't have the nerve to forget. "Borel, palette hands who've never made a mistake that wasn't called work." Ned raised the cup higher. "And to all those who still come because we're too cowards to stop in time." The record made a crooked, low hum, 3-2-3, as if it were trying to sort out our sentences. The light hung in its yellow cat, the lamps made faces look like card forgers.

We drank. The whiskey bit. It went in like a lie you needed and stayed in your stomach like a truth no one ordered. One coughed, another belched guiltily. The bottle was passed around, Nemo held the spoon like a little policeman.

"Measure," he said. Ned followed the eye roll with a flood he didn't say. "Measure my fist," he thought loud enough for me to hear. Conseil tucked the bottle under his arm, filled it neatly, a snap, a clink on the rim. Borel got the second sip—not down his throat, against his lips. Maybe just touching the limit is enough, I thought, and I knew it's never enough.

"He wasn't one of those stealers," said a voice from the semicircle. "He just always worked too long." "Then he was a thief to himself," Ned retorted. "Like the rest of us." A quiet chuckle somewhere, too late, too wrong. Nemo looked up, and the chuckle died. "Say short sentences or shut up," he muttered. "We already have enough long sentences." I stared at Borel. His face was now a thing of calm. I didn't like the word. It sounded like an insult down here.

The cups continued to make rounds. No orgy, just obligatory drinking. A snake that bites once, then goes back to sleep. Ned pressed the rim to his tongue as if to brand himself. "Cheap," he said again, "I taste the pharmacy." "Pharmacy saves lives," said Conseil. "Not mine," Ned retorted. "Yours saves them from you," I murmured. He grinned without joy. "Then call this crap medicine and give me a double dose." Nemo: "A spoonful." Ned: "A sea." The bottle swayed between his hands like an election promise.

At some point, someone started humming the old harbor singsong, that lie of brotherhood in the dirt. No singing, just a slurring of throats. "Heave away..." – that was all they had, and that was all they needed. The Nautilus hummed deeper against it, not in time, more like a reminder of who holds the walls up here. I saw the sliders – air, light, work – the saints who hate their holiness. Air down a notch, as if they wanted to chastise the space. Work up a notch, so no one forgets where hands get their dignity from. I raised the bottle again, for Borel's sake, for our sake, for the sake of some lie that stinks less than the others.

"For the throat," said Ned. "For the wound," said Nemo. "For peace," said Conseil. "For the record," I said, and that made me look like an ass. I drank anyway. The whiskey flowed and opened a door inside me behind which only noise lives. I let him do it. Borel lay there and did what dead people do best: let others do it. A sailor placed the back of his hand against his forehead, as if one could read temperature like guilt. He nodded slowly, more to himself than to us. "He's here," he said. No one asked where.

The argument about "throat" versus "wound" didn't make a speech, it just took a seat. Ned took more space from him, Nemo took air from him, Conseil took numbers from him. "If you empty the bottle, it will empty you," said Conseil.

"I've never been full," Ned retorted. "Then start today." "With the wrong stuff." "It's the only stuff." Ned pointed the cup at Nemo. "He has more. He always has more." "I have enough," said Nemo, and it sounded not like boasting, but like a threat. The chorus made small, uncertain noises. Men calculating whether the fist can do economics today.

I put the cup down, left my hand on the metal until I felt the cold. The cold was honest. The cup was honest. Only we weren't. "For the throat," I said quietly, looking at Nemo. "For the wound," he repeated, and his eyes said: The throat is the wound, but I won't give you the word. I turned the cup over, saw the rim—a scratch, a jagged edge, as if someone had rubbed it against a railing and later lied that it was new. I liked the cup very much. It did what we all do: It held, even though it was rotten.

The crew changed places. One fetched a cloth and laid it over Borel's stomach. Another pushed the crates closer together, as if order were a coffin lid. Nemo put the spoon in his pocket, as if he were fed up with the world. "That's enough," he said. "It's never enough," said Ned. "Today's enough," said Nemo, and the record nodded, 3-2-3, 3-2-3, like a judge having a bad day, but his gavel is still wooden and wood beats hard enough. I heard my heart in time with the boat, and the boat had no idea about me. It pumped because pumping was its job. I drank because drinking was my job. For now.

Then that quiet, disgusting spell happened, the one that had haunted us for days like a bad-tempered house spirit. In the cup, half empty, on the inside, a pearl of whiskey dissolved, clean, round, golden brown. It didn't do what pearls do. It didn't roll down. It rose. Slowly, as if it knew how much it offended us. It climbed the inside wall, a drop with storm boots, reached the rim, and stuck there as if someone had affixed it with an invisible nail. It vibrated 3-2-3, ever so slightly, as if it were mocking the world, the rules, the fingers, the tongues. Ned stared at it as if it were an eye he wanted to claw out. Conseil whispered "registered" because he didn't know any magic words. I raised the cup, ever so slowly. The pearl stayed. It grinned at us, mouthless, for no reason. And in that grin, there was more blasphemy than our curses ever had.

The Whiskey War began, quieter than I thought. No yelling, no punching—just Ned's fingers gripping the bottle too tightly, and Nemo's eyes, which had long since taken it from his hand. Two men, two dogs, one bone. The crew stood still, everyone knowing what might come next, yet everyone still wanting to keep drinking. "Give it here," Ned growled, "or I'll drink you." Nemo didn't see him, but the spoon in his own hand, and the spoon looked as if it had already

made too many judgments today. "Ration," he said. "Order." Ned spat on the floor. "Order is just another word for funeral."

The plate hummed as if it were trying to referee. Air up, light down, work half a wheel higher – every breath heavier, every face darker, every hand angrier. I felt the space shrink. Conseil stood between them, chalk in his fist, like a scribe taking the minutes before the argument ends. "One more spoonful," said Nemo, "no more." Ned snatched the bottle, glass against metal, a sound that hurt all his teeth. I thought he was going to strike. But he drank. A long, honest swallow that made him cough, but also made him laugh. "That's how you die," he wheezed, "honestly." Nemo raised his hand, and the boat obeyed. Air down, a hit. Ned choked, gasping for breath, and in that very choking lay the proof: Nemo didn't need fists. He had valves.

The crew murmured, voices like wood in a stove, quiet, dangerous. One said, "Give us more." Another, "He's hoarding." Ned laughed, red and wet. "You see. He's saving the poison, as if we might still need it." Nemo put the spoon back in his pocket, so calmly that it made me angrier than anything Ned did. "Give," Ned snarled. "No," Nemo said. "Then take it." Ned's fist rose. Conseil grabbed, held, but only halfway. I knew that in a moment the blood would stop from the storm. The boat growled louder, as if it had realized that an argument hurts it more than a wave.

Then the thing happened that froze us all. The three sliders of the plate—air, light, work—popped. Just like that. A short jerk, a triple "clack," like a verdict no one contested. 3-2-3, clean, closed, no hand, no mercy. The argument stopped, not because we wanted it to, but because the boat had said: Quiet. Ned still held his fist, trembling, searching, then he let it fall, as if he had just spat in a judge's face and realized that the judge was the walls themselves. Nemo looked at him, and this time he smiled. A short, bitter thing that said: I need you, but not your truth. Ned drank anyway, and the whiskey grinned along with him.

The dead man was finally calm, but the bottle wasn't. It stood there, half empty, heavy as guilt. Nemo held it in his grip like a sermon no one wants to hear. Ned stared at it as if it were a lover who had betrayed him and yet remained his only one. "One more sip," he forced out. "He doesn't need his share anymore." Conseil covered Borel with a cloth, smoothed the edge, as if that would make death easier to sort out. "That's enough," he said. Ned growled, "It's never enough." And I saw the argument creeping back up, like a pack of rats that has learned that cage bars are only recommendations.

Nemo pulled out the logbook, opened it to a page, and placed the coin from the wreck on it. "Obolus," he said, as if he were now a gravedigger too. The coin lay gleaming there, a wet shimmer in the yellow light. He wrote Borel's name, the date, and then a number that didn't fit. Conseil immediately raised an eyebrow. "The year is wrong." Ned laughed, a cutting, ugly laugh. "See? Even his accounts lie." Nemo ignored us, carrying on writing, as if the metal on the wall cared more about accounting than we did.

The crew whispered. One said, "If he's lying to the dead, what is he doing to us?" Another made the sign of the cross, even though he knew that blessings have no delivery down here. The plate responded politely: air tighter, work tighter, light a touch harder. It was as if the boat itself wanted to end the debate. I felt sweat running down my back, not from the storm, but from this accursed administration. Ned stepped forward, grabbed the logbook. Nemo let him, but the plate didn't: a dull crack, 3-2-3, the metal grinned at us like a judge applauding himself.

Conseil finally placed the coin on Borel's chest, beneath the cloth. "For the ride," he murmured. Ned tried to retrieve it, but his fingers remained stuck, as if the dead man had raised his hand again. "Screw it," he hissed, withdrawing his fingers. The coin slid sideways, as if on a course of its own. I swore it stopped lying in the middle of the glass—inside, not outside. It vibrated, ever so slightly, and rotated 3-2-3, like a small, cold planet that knew it was now our timekeeper.

The whiskey continued to eat its way through the group, cheap consolation with a burning tongue. Ned had the bottle in his hand again, swallowing deeply, wheezing, grinning as if he'd just lied to the devil and won. Conseil counted each sip like a doctor counting the heartbeats of a dying man, "twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two," and held the chalk so tightly it threatened to break. Nemo stood there, unmoving, but the room acted as if he were keeping an invisible tab on us all. "One more," Ned gasped, "so I can tell you what I really think." He drank. Then he spat. "Fucking captain, fucking boat, fucking God out there. I want air, I want land, I want my fucking life back."

The crew murmured, voices like sandpaper, rough and uncertain. One nodded. One cried. One almost reached for the lock, his fingers already on the lever, as if salvation lay outside. I jumped up, grabbed his hand, and yelled at him, "Stay, you idiot! There's only salt outside, no sky!" His eyes were blank, but he obeyed because my grip was stronger than his longing. Conseil tied him to the bench with a strap; the bench squeaked as if it suddenly had feelings. Ned laughed mockingly. "You see, Nemo, your boat is only holding us because we're too

cowardly to walk ourselves." Nemo didn't even look. He didn't need a glance. The board was already obeying: work up, air tighter, as if it wanted to discipline us until we fell silent.

I dragged on my butt, nicotine burning like a final weapon in my throat. The smoke didn't rise. It curled downward against all logic, looping on the ground, crawling up my boots like a snake seeking the wrong target. Then it rose again, not straight, but in a curve, clean, elegant, as if drawn. A 3-2-3 line, shimmering, gray, a damned signature made of smoke, written directly on the lamp. Ned held his breath, Conseil whispered numbers, I stared until my eyes hurt. The smoke lingered, vibrating, and only dissipated when Nemo took the bottle from Ned's hand with a wave of his hand. "Enough," he said. And the smoke did what none of us could: It obeyed.

The whiskey was half empty, the air half dead. Borel lay under the sheet, his hands neatly folded like a joke no one understands. The crew stood spread out, each with their own ghost in their head. Nemo placed the bottle next to the logbook as if it were just a number in a spreadsheet. Ned sat on the bench, his eyes red, his mouth full of rage that had yet to find an outlet. "You killed him," he muttered. "The sea," Nemo corrected. "No," Ned gasped, "your rations, your rules, your shitty tact." Nemo was silent. And that silence was worse than any insult.

Conseil covered the cloth more tightly, put away the chalk, as if he could catalog death. "One down," he said matter-of-factly. "One too many," I corrected. We each drank a last drop, none left for Borel, only for the throats that still wouldn't stop. The record nodded obediently again, 3-2-3, as if it hadn't been infected by the scene at all. But I swore, every time my heart skipped a beat, it did too. The boat wasn't a witness. It was an accomplice.

Outside, beyond the glass, something moved. Not a storm, not a wave. A back, flat, broad, the shadow of a beast that had long known us. Too big for a shark, too close for rest. It glided by, slowly, like a judge reading the papers. Ned saw it first. "Whale," he whispered, "or worse." No one answered. The thing was there and not there, a promise that would come tomorrow. I wanted the whiskey because at least it was lying to me. Nemo closed the logbook, slammed the page shut as if the chapter were closed. "Quiet," he said. No one laughed.

And then the final little mockery happened. A trail crept out of the sheet covering Borel's body. Not paint, just wetness. It didn't run downward. It ran sideways. A fine, clear line, horizontal, like a drawing in the dust. It stretched

across the floor, across the metal, until it stopped right at the plate—at the "work" hand. There it paused, gleamed for a breath in the dirty light, and disappeared. Ned cursed. Conseil muttered, "Noted." Nemo didn't smile. And I knew Death drinks cheap whiskey here—and counts to our rhythm.

The Dance of the Desperate

The smell clung to us like a bad decision: tar, spirits, cold whiskey, and the breath of metal that never tires. Borel's cloth still lay on the back of the crates, a clean spot in a room that didn't deserve cleanliness. The lamp gave off its yellow hangover light, offended but ready to serve. The new wedge was stuck in the bulkhead, suspicious like a dog that lets you in but bares its teeth. The glass sweated in rings as if someone had nailed halos to a latrine. The record purred 3-2-3, the old bastard—and every time the beat tickled my ribs in my stomach, I knew that today we would be dancing, whether we wanted to or not.

"Heat or die," said Nemo, and the Nautilus nodded to him, without gesture, just with that obedient whir. "Circle. Pitch. Pump. Check wedges." He didn't have to raise his voice. The room lifted for him. One placed the hand pump in the middle, a green tin body with the pride of a street sweeper. Two pushed open the bilge hatch; the stench made the eyes wet, but at least it smelled honest. "Air minus a quarter," said Nemo, "Work plus half, light stays so you'll be ashamed." Air pinched our throats, work pressed our calves, the light showed every dent in our faces. We lined up in a semicircle, boots side by side, as if we were a parade of dirty truths.

"Tempo to the plate," Conseil shouted, and his tone made me angry because he was right. He put the chalk away—no grid yet, just a small, round chalk dot on the ground, right in front of the pump: zero. "Short—short—long," he said quietly, and we set our heels: left, right, both; left, right, both. The ground responded with a horny, shabby drumming that didn't pretend to be music. The hand pump went off, one man pushed, the other pulled, and we watched the fetid water give up. The wave in my belly went "tch," the boat went "mmm," and I closed my mouth so nothing would fall out that would later be used against me.

Ned spat on the planks. "Dancing is for people who are afraid of knives." He stamped anyway, so hard I could count his heel bones by ear. "Hold the push-pull for later," I hissed. "I'm holding nothing," he panted, "I'm warming up for

murder." He grinned, and the grin was a splinter in his brain. His cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth, off but on, a threat to the air. "No cigarettes," shouted one of Nemo's screw-believers. "Fuck you," said Ned, "warm blood stinks less when it smells of tobacco." "Wedges!" Conseil snapped. Two went to the bulkhead, grabbing tar and wood with their hands as if they were children trying to climb off the sofa. The thread stayed dry. The wedge stayed in. I liked him. He seemed as if he'd decided to be sensible for once.

Nemo stood at the plate, one fingertip over air, the other over work, as if each pointer were a nipple he didn't want to touch too hard. 3-2-3. "Keep your breath on time," he said. "If you breathe out of time, you breathe less." A man in the back laughed, too loudly, too briefly; the air took away his punch line and gave him a cough. The hand pump clapped, the casings scraped, someone cursed because bilge water was making love to their boots. I heard the nuna—the boat—translating the movement into its own song of tin and screws: stomp—stomp—push; stomp—stomp—push. Not music. Duty.

Conseil paced the circle like a doorman counting tongues. "Heel, ball, heel—don't shuffle, kick." He shook hands, not to hold, just to count: "One—two—three." I felt my calves begin to burn, an honest pain that reminds you of a time when running was still freedom. Now running was an act of bureaucracy. Ned muttered, "short—long—short," just loud enough for me to hear. The counter-beat clung to my eardrums like a dirty promise. "Leave it," I said. "Later," he nodded. The word smelled of blood.

Outside, something went "tch" against the hull, a thin kiss of mass. The plate twitched a touch after 2-3-2, caught itself, so obediently, so sworn, that I was furious at metal. "Go on!" Nemo shouted, and our boots obeyed, we the dogs, the beat the whip. The pump vomited blackly; a man howled, but only with his back because his mouth was busy. Another tilted his head back, closed his eyes, and kicked so cleanly that I almost wanted to kiss him—in gratitude that someone here still knows how to keep things in order when the rest just want to scream.

I pedaled and cranked, and the room warmed. Not nicely warm. Workshop warm. Sweat without tenderness. Our smell mingled with the Nautilus's breath, and I couldn't tell which I hated more. "Switch hands!" Conseil shouted; we rotated to the pump, to the wedges, to the glass. One of us wiped away the condensation with the back of his hand; the water left a mark on his fingers that didn't run down. "See?" he said, didn't show it to anyone, and carried on. Ned came to the pump, grabbed, pulled, and groaned. "I'll kick him in the

teeth," he panted, and the pump obediently went "snap." "You do that anyway," I said. "The teeth are us."

Nemo released a millimeter of air, not out of kindness, but because his lungs were growing unclean. He left work behind because work is the religion here. The light remained yellow, the humiliating one, like the lining of a cheap coffin. The hand pump ran faster, our pounding grew harder, and I felt the pressure on my ribs no longer scratch, but rather stroke, as if testing whether the cage would hold. A man in the front almost toppled over, got an elbow, kept to the beat, because here everything that isn't dying keeps to the beat.

The chalk on the ground—that small dot—had company: sweat dripped right onto it, as if he'd memorized an address I never wrote down. "Two more rounds," said Conseil, "then wedge control, then pump rest, then your water." Water here meant two sips, not drinking. The whittling of throats that shouldn't beg for sips. Ned coughed, spat blackly, and pedaled on. I saw his heel, the edge of leather that once belonged to an honest animal before it turned into a mess in our stomachs. He pedaled like someone who can't stand still, because standing still means your head starts getting stupid ideas.

The Nautilus made that small, contented "hm" sound, when metal no longer vibrates but sings. It was almost beautiful. I hated it immediately, so it wouldn't have a chance. "Wedges!" Conseil shouted, and two went to the bulkhead, pressed, and listened. Not a spray, just an offended film of sweat that couldn't decide whether it wanted to be drops. "Holds," said one. "Holds," repeated the other. "Holds," said the record—no, it didn't say it, but the beat sounded like it. Nemo just moved his eyes. He directed with his pupils. The boat understood.

And then came the moment that doesn't fit in the workshop manual. We stomped on, the wood absorbing our footsteps like debts. The room steamed, the pump slapped, the plate fitted. I looked up, just to escape the yellow that was getting on my nerves—and froze. Above us, on the ceiling, were boot prints. Not old. Wet. Fresh. Framed in salt petals. One, two, three; then two again; then three—spaced out at our damned 3-2-3. They ran across the ceiling, pretty as a lie in a Sunday shirt, as if someone up there had been marching in circles, stealing our soles. "Holy shit," said Ned, without looking, as if the back of his neck had eyes. Conseil followed my gaze, counting in a whisper, "one—two—three—one—two—one—two—three." Nemo didn't look up. He didn't need to. The room had already told him. The prints remained. They didn't drip. They waited. In time.

Conseil drew the chalk as if he held the leash of a stupid but powerful idea in his hand. "Grid," he said curtly, and the white lines settled on the wet sheet metal like bones that first had to explain to the room how to stand. Across, lengthwise, neatly, then diagonals, only two, because he knew when order eats itself away. The chalk scratched, a sound like bad teeth. The drops stuck to the edges and looked like small, glass thumbtacks. "Cross points are breathing points," he said. "If you fall over, you fall on one of them, not next to it." Nobody laughed at his pedantry anymore. We knew that down here, mathematics was the only thing that didn't vomit.

"Reline the pump," he shouted, and two men traded places as if they were pieces in a board game where the rules are written in half. The bilge hatch hung open like an ill-mannered mouth. The smell rose, turning every sentence into a curse. "Crank," said Conseil, "not wrestle." The hands found handles, the handles found joints, and the joints found reasons they would hate tomorrow. Ned stepped into the circle, heels loud as judgment. "Short—long—short," he muttered, just enough to catch my teeth. "Not now," I snapped. He grinned, and in the grin was the intention to someday build a door from that grid.

Nemo didn't stand in the middle of it. He stood at the plate, a shadow with a pulse. Air remained, work remained, light remained—but remaining felt like a hand holding your forehead. He didn't need words. His silence ran through the valves like electricity through a bad sermon. 3-2-3. "Keep pace," said Conseil, standing next to the hand pump, the bolts like brass buds that refuse to bloom. "Left, right, both," he counted. "Louder," someone growled. "Quieter," said Nemo, without opening his mouth. The room obeyed, as if the command were embedded in the wall.

The first man at the pump was one of the screw believers, his palms covered in scales instead of skin. He pushed as if he were taking a note from the water. The second pulled, cleanly, his shoulders a small, stubborn river. I kicked, the ground taking my footprint like a testimonial, chalky, angry. The chalk didn't break; it held. A drop slid along the line, stopping at the intersection, as if someone had said "Halt" and promised him cigarettes. Ned slapped his heel on the edge of the grid, not hard, but wrong. "That's my place," hissed the sailor beside him. "Your place is wherever I curse it," Ned retorted, and yet he kicked cleanly, because even his anger knew when not to ruin tactics.

"Push-pull later," said Conseil, and didn't do me the favor of looking at Ned. He tapped the chalk three times on the floor, short—short—long, and we all went along, as if we were strangers who happened to be cursing in the same language. The pump bent, it creaked, it did the job it always has to do: the job

no one wants and without which everyone dies. Water came out, first black, then grayer, then just insulted. It ran through the hose like a panting dog. A man slipped, caught himself, tore apart a curse, put the pieces back in his place. I kept my eyes on the glass: blind, greasy, and somewhere outside that back brushed past again, not interested in us, only in power, in being world out of disinterest.

"Second row, move up," Conseil called. We traded as if our sweat were glue and our hatred the spring that released us again. I grabbed the crank. It was wet with other lives. My forearm pulled, my back creaked, my tongue became a piece of leather someone had forgotten to salt. Ned stepped up beside me, just too close, an invitation to argument. "Tell him to give us some air," he gasped. "Tell him yourself." "I'll tell him with my feet." He put down his heel, a fraction off, push-pull like a bad joke. "Not now," I repeated, and he growled at Patience until it ignored him.

The chalk lines took on little rivers that flashed in time—no light, just a wet sheen. A guy with an old dock song in his teeth hummed "heave" because he didn't know any other words. The choir wasn't joining in. We had no throats left. Instead, this stomping, going down to our knees and back up again, over and over again, as if height were a drug and depth the dealer. Conseil walked in a semicircle and slapped his fingertips twice on the frame: "Swap." Hands exchanged grips without exchanging faces. One man had blood over his ankle, an elongated bead that wouldn't fall, neither down nor sideways. It ran across the skin, stopped over a bone, pulsing in a 3-2-3, fine, stubborn, and refusing to acknowledge gravity. "Tie down," Conseil said without looking. The man did so and kept pedaling, as if we were all just casings for bruises.

Outside, something scratched at us for a while, not a shock, more like a curious knife. The plate stumbled a touch, 2-3-2, apologized with a polite 3-2-3. Nemo put in a millimeter of work so that the rage in his stomach didn't just sweat, but served. "Go on!" he shouted into the room, and the room turned the word into an escape route that no one took. I felt the bilge drain, the gap in the bulkhead remained dry, the wedge proud like a dog that had finally done something right. Ned half-closed his eyes, the face of a man counting the stairs to the lock with his tongue. "Not today," I said again. "Today we learn to dance." "I'm dancing on his grave," he spat, and no one asked which one.

Conseil now made the grid more precise: dots to numbers. 1 at the pump, 2 at the intersection by the bulkhead, 3 at the glass, 4 next to the plate, 5 at the bilge, 6 again at the pump. "Keep counting when you run out of air," he commanded, "then at least you'll hear something that obeys." We didn't laugh.

We couldn't. But something in our feet understood him. The pounding became more honest, the cranking less frantic. My fingers found traction, as if they were suddenly related to the handle. The noise in the belly of the Nautilus was no longer just noise. It was a bad anthem that you still sing along to because it keeps your mouth busy.

And then Ned started pecking anyway. Not wildly. Smartly. On the third strike, he let his heel come in a touch too late: short—short—long—short. The grid accepted it like a secret, the line beneath his soles gleamed more evilly. "Stop it," gritted the screw-believer next to him. "Learn to listen," Ned retorted, and just then the pump made that one little misstep that tells you: Two more of these, and we're drinking salt again. "One—two—three!" Conseil snapped, with a sharpness that even made Ned's throat obey briefly. He immediately placed it cleanly again, so cleanly that I knew: He was making a mental note. For later. For the right step on the ladder.

The chalk on my soles made small, sad stars when I turned away. The glass sweated, pushing streaks that cheekily clung to the grid logic, as if drops had learned math. A sailor wiped with his sleeve, and the water from his sleeve ran not down but across, stopping at the hatch seam, because even wetness needs boundaries when steel sets them. Nemo didn't observe all this with his eyes; he observed it with the tablet. Air remained relentless, work held us to attention, light turned our faces into masks. I tasted metal, the same old song, only today my tongue sang along.

And then something happened that made no sound and yet was louder than any beat. At first I thought it was my heart, lost in my skull. Then I thought it was a screw practicing Morse code somewhere in the frame. Both were wrong. It didn't come from anywhere. It came from everywhere. A silent beat—inaudible, not palpable with the skin, only in the ear, right in the ear, as if someone had placed a small, invisible finger on my eardrum. Tock. Pause. Tock. Tock. Pause. Tock. 3-2-3. I put my hand to my ear—it stayed. I pressed both together—it stayed. Ned looked at me, and I knew he had the same finger in his head. Conseil blinked, a number in each pupil. No one said anything, and the beat was there nonetheless, clean, recurring, without source, without mercy—a metronome that didn't need to sound because the Nautilus had long since taken up residence within us.

The beat consumes anger. First you feel it in your knees, then in your teeth, then in your head, and eventually you realize you've long since stopped stomping for yourself, and started stomping for this damned tin monster that lets us breathe. Whiskey residue still burned in my esophagus, and every stomp

forced the alcohol back up like a stray prayer. Ned laughed, but the laughter had no joy—it sounded like a rusty hinge that's never oiled. He hacked in his push-pull: short—long—short. I felt him insulting the ground, and the ground insulted me back by sending his boot back too hard.

Conseil clapped his hands, keeping us lined up like a troop of idiots. "Three. Two. Three." His mouth was a chalk-flavored metronome. He walked from intersection to intersection, his eyes alert like a dealer's counting every coin. I hated him for it and loved him for it, because at least he was doing what needed to be done. Sweat dripped from my forehead, didn't fall—but stuck to the grid, shimmering for a moment on the white line as if it were paint, not liquid. "Do you see that?" I asked. No one answered. Maybe they all saw it, maybe no one wanted to believe it.

A sailor stumbled, almost falling out of the circle. Ned grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him back. No pity, only anger. "If you miss the beat, you'll fall out of the boat," he snarled. The man nodded, pale, and continued to stamp as if his feet were made of lead. I gasped for air, which came in short bursts, always short bursts. Nemo had us under control, not with his fists, not with words, but with those damned millimeters on the board. Air/Light/Work, that was his bible, and we were merely the pages he turned when he felt like it.

Whiskey breath mingled with sweat, and the mixture smelled of the harbor, of the cemetery, of stories no one wants to tell. Someone in the back sang, just briefly, a note, not a song. He wanted to laugh, but a sob came. The footsteps continued anyway. I kicked, Ned kicked, Conseil clapped. The room grew smaller, denser, hotter. My lungs screamed. I kept kicking. Ned grinned like a bastard who couldn't care less about the world.

And then the detail that still makes my teeth grind: Blood gushed from the ankle of the sailor with the weak shoulder. A tiny drop, no more than a pinhead. It didn't do what blood does. It didn't fall. It crawled. Sideways across the skin, as if gravity had forgotten where it lives. It stopped above the bone, vibrating, fine, stubborn, in a 3-2-3, like a heartbeat no one wants. Ned saw it. Conseil saw it. I saw it. The sailor kept pedaling, completely numb. The drop pulsed until the boat took the next stroke—then it disappeared, just like that, without a trace, as if it had never decided to offend the rules.

The thing outside made itself known again. Not a hard push, more a graze, as if a gigantic tongue were running along the hull. The boat vibrated askew, and the deck slipped, cheekily, briefly in 2-3-2. Each of our steps was faster, harder, because fear is a better conductor than Conseil with his chalk. "Keep the beat!"

he yelled, but his heels were already pounding like a pile of horses in a panicked run. Ned double-stepped, deliberately leaving a gap in the ranks. "See?" he gasped, "those animals outside dance better than we do." Nemo moved his head just a millimeter – and the air tightened a beat. We choked, coughed, and still stamped on.

The hand pump groaned as if it were about to lose teeth. One growled, "It's tearing us apart." I wanted to agree, but then the boat itself drew the line: Two bolts on the wall, rusty, loose for days, were turning. Not by hand. Not by us. They made*click*, a small, rude noise, and suddenly stood firmer, neater, as if they'd decided we shouldn't drown just yet. I stared, sweating salt, and swore I saw the heads of the propellers bobbing in a 3-2-3, as if they were laughing at us. Ned grinned bloodily. "Even the propellers know when to dance." Conseil clapped louder, the chalk broke in his fist, and Nemo said nothing—he didn't need to say anything. The boat was already his mouth.

Ned was making a scene now. He deliberately stamped his feet off-key, tearing little hellholes into the grid with his heels. Conseil clenched his hands, counting like a madman: "Three—two—three!" His voice was like a rope he wrapped around our throats to keep us in a circle. The crew swayed—one in time, one off, one already halfway out of time. Nemo stood motionless, his shadow longer than he was. He no longer needed orders; the record led the way: tighten the air, increase the workload, lower the light. Every breath in his lungs felt like an application that no one would sign.

Ned yelled over the pounding: "Air up! Work down!" A few men actually answered, hoarsely, desperately. Conseil clapped harder, his chalky hand slashing lines in the air. "Stay with me! Three—two—three!" He wasn't a commander, just a man with numbers, but numbers held up better than any lie. Ned spat, stamped again in counter-beat. I knew: He was building a vocabulary of feet for later, for the rebellion he was secretly already dancing.

The room was sweating. Sweat dripped from our chins, but it didn't fall right away. The drops collected, hung in the air, trembled, then formed small arcs, three next to each other. I saw them clear, gray, translucent. Three clouds of breath, curved like brackets, clean, precise, in a 3-2-3 pattern. They hovered a heartbeat above us, as if they were the written record of our misery. Ned saw them, too. "There," he gasped, "the wall is writing." Conseil nodded, as if he'd ordered it. Nemo didn't blink. And the arcs dissolved again, quietly, harmlessly, as if to make us believe they'd never been there.

The guy with the harbor song in his teeth was the first to break. No drama, no scream—just a misstep, then a twitch in his shoulders, as if the bones were trying to burst out of his skin. He didn't fall; he vibrated, like a wire too close to an electric current. His boots hacked automatically for two or three more times, then his body shut down: arms stiff, eyes white, mouth an ugly gape. "Down!" Conseil yelled, and we caught him like wood. He twitched in a 3-2-3, so clean, so fucking musical, that the saliva in my mouth made me sick.

"Give him some air!" Ned yelled, "or he'll die!" Nemo didn't move from the desk. "He's a man," he said calmly, "the boat's dead." The table remained stubborn, air only a breath, work stood like a gallows. "I'll tear your fucking fingers off!" Ned snarled, jumping, but my hand was on his collar first. "Hold him," I gritted, meaning the twitching man, not the captain, and only later realized how angry that made me. Two of the screw-believers dropped to their knees, grabbed the man's wrists, and pressed them to the ground until his veins sang. Conseil ripped off the belt and tied his shins together, not to tie him, but to beat the rhythm out of his legs. "Tongue!" he shouted, and I stuck a wet rag between the man's teeth to stop him from eating himself.

The body shook, jumped, paused, jumped again. His eyes flickered like two lamps that no longer knew who was paying the counter. Ned knelt by his head, one hand on his neck, the other to the sky, which doesn't exist here. "Breathe, you bastard," he whispered, and that whisper frustrated me more than any roar. "Air," he grunted, looking at Nemo, who just stroked the pointer with his pupil and then let go. "Boat first," he said quietly. "Man after." "Man now!" Ned bared, and the two words were fists without fingers.

Outside, that long thing brushed past the bulkhead again, not hard, but impudent. The Nautilus growled back, a deep, tired "let it go." The hand pump continued to clatter, crying; the bilge spat a few more offended gulps and then pretended to be empty. I felt the man's trembling in my forearm, as if he had a second heart going sideways. "Turn on the air," Conseil said, not as a request, but as a bill. Nemo blinked once. Nothing. "If the plate tips now, Keil will tip," he said, "and then four of us will drown instead of one." "Bills can go to hell," Ned pressed, "he's breathing now."

The man made that little shitting noise shared by babies and the dying, a burst blister in his throat. I put my hand on his chest, and it jumped like a startled rat. "Count," Conseil said, and I realized I was already doing it. "One—two—three—one—two—three." The spasms went with him. It was insultingly beautiful. I wanted to cry and laugh and set something on fire. Ned bent closer. "If you die, bite my wrist so I'll know," he murmured. His teeth pressed the rag, let it go,

didn't find skin, found salt. "Good," Ned said, and his voice was soft as a knife handle.

The chalk beneath our knees was scratched by rings, nails, and teeth. The man jerked upright, then fell again. "Hold your head!" "Hold your legs!" "Not so tight, he has to go through!" "He doesn't have to do anything, he should stay!"—sentences like screws no one wants to cut out. Nemo stood. He simply stood. He did more by standing than Ned did with ten kicks. "Boat holds," he said, "and so does he, if the math allows." I hated every syllable. I hated that they were true. I hated that they let us live.

And then, for whatever reason, I looked at the chronometer. Maybe because I needed an adult in the room. The precise little whore under glass ticked as she always did: correct, unruffled, clean. Second hand: clack, clack—and then it stopped. It stayed. Not trembling, not sticking—still. One. Two. For three heartbeats, time held its breath. The man continued to twitch, but more quietly, as if someone had turned down the volume. My ears grew wide, like plates with nothing inside them. Ned held his breath, Conseil kept the beat, Nemo held the world. And then the clock jumped. No catching up, no fidgeting—a clean "on," as if time had retied its shoelaces and was now running again because it can.

With the jump, the body went soft. The twitching fell out of rhythm, stumbled, searched for support. "Now," said Conseil, and slid his hand to his neck: pulse—there. Thin, but there. I let go of the rag; the teeth didn't hold. Ned rested his forehead for a second on ours, the one on my wrist, which smelled of tar. "Good," he grumbled, and the word was so small that it stumbled. Nemo turned up the air a touch, down the work a touch. No thanks. No glance. Just administration, which allows itself to be polite when no one dies.

We were on our knees for a beat, two, three, and I swore the ground breathed with him. The man groaned, a proper, ugly, human volume. "Tie him down," said Conseil, and loosened his belt so he remained flat, but not bound. Ned wiped his forehead, pretending he was just spreading sweat. "I'll get you some air later," he whispered, and I knew he meant it. I also knew he meant it in the wrong way.

The circle was formed again. Legs found heel, heel found grid, grid found guilt. I straightened up, felt the bursting in my knees, the rust in my back. The pump waited like a dog that needs work so it doesn't bite. Nemo was still standing, and his shadow was the same length. The record hummed 3-2-3, 3-2-3, contentedly like a judge who has just postponed an execution, not out of

kindness, but for scheduling reasons. I looked at the clock again: it ticked obediently, as if nothing had ever happened to it. Liar, I thought, dear liar—stay with us.

And somewhere above us, that back scraped against the bulkhead again, slowly, as if it wanted to savor the new silence. "Onward," commanded Conseil, and we stood still. Boots found rhythm. Hands found work. Anger found room in the pocket. The man breathed. The boat stopped. And time acted as if it were on our side, for three or four steps.

The credits rolled without music. Just sweat that stings your eyes and kneecaps that sound like they're made of cheap crockery. We stood in a circle, separated, then came together again, like people who can't find the door. The hand pump took its last hit, the hose slobbered in offense and went quiet. The bilge made that little "pf" sound when it's finished with stories today. Air remained scarce, but no longer hostile; work slumped its shoulders without giving up; light lingered in the yellow tomcat, as if no one needed to like it anymore. The smell was even more honest now: human, metal, old water, a trace of whiskey from the corner where Borel's scarf lay like a neat alibi.

Conseil paced the circle, chalk outside again, this time not as a metronome, but as a record. Arrows, short, concise, without art. One pointed to the pump (lives), one to the bulkhead (holds), one to the glass (blind). The last, smallest, so narrow it was almost just a thought, pointed to the first-aid kit. "Why?" I asked. "Stocks," he said. "And because someone will be looking for something in there tonight that isn't called iodine." He didn't mean Ned. Or he meant him first. Ned stood at the counter, hands on thighs, back bent, mouth full of the kind of silence you only hear in bars when it's already too late. His boots had chalk on the edges, small, dirty moons. He looked up at the ladder, counted rungs with his chin, stopped somewhere halfway up, the way you break off a curse so it fits better later.

Nemo stopped, of course he stopped. Two fingers on work, one on air, as if teaching a wayward child to breathe. He didn't look down a line, and yet I knew he'd seen them all before Conseil made it. "Round complete," he said, and the Nautilus nodded its plate like a judge feigning retirement. One of the Screw Believers wanted to say "Well done," realized halfway through that he needed a license for this kind of thing down here, and then did it with his eyes. The man with the harbor song was lying on his side, belt loose, tongue in, breathing outrageously fast. Ned stood beside him, his fist on the ground, as if waiting for the next argument like a bus, which always comes when you go to the bathroom.

I leaned my forehead briefly against the cold bulkhead, just to hear if the animal was still outside or had already crawled somewhere else. Not a blow, not a jerk. Just that long, broad scraping sound, which isn't aggression, but possession. The back came again, the broad, flat one, the wall that swims as if it knew the title of the book and wanted us to say it too: Enemy Image. Not a shark. Not a wreck. Something with time. Something that had listened to us stamping and was now raking its toe along our skin. The glass hummed, short, deep, like a dog that simply can't help but respond. Nemo didn't look. Ned did. He looked and memorized the sound that no larynx makes. "I'll take him," he whispered, "if he comes close enough." "With what?" I asked. "With everything that's left." Not much, I thought. Enough, his face said.

Conseil opened the first-aid kit, no drama, just two clicks that sounded as if civilization still existed. Iodine, spirit, gauze, needles, staples, a strap. And in the back, under the last layer, something that didn't belong there: a package wrapped in brown paper, small, too clean for this place. He saw it, left it, closed the box again. "Stocks," he repeated. No morals, just a mark on the balance sheet. Ned didn't see it. Or he saw it and pretended there were better times to steal. I felt my tongue hitting the roof of my mouth, dry, even though the air was wet. The metronome finger in my ear—tock...tock tock...tock—was still there, quieter, but there, like a tenant who pays and still bothers.

The men dissolved into tasks. One swept, one stacked, one stayed with the belt man, one stood guard at the wedge and threatened him not to become sensible. The rest did what other people do: stand, breathe, pretend that not dying is a profession. I sat down on the box that used to be called loot and was now allowed to be a chair. The lid had a crack that looked like a coastline; I ran my thumb over it, felt salt, felt wood, which holds nothing of life except traces. The coin under Borel's cloth made no sound, but I felt it through the floor. Sometimes oboli are louder than bells.

"New round," said Nemo without straining his mouth. "Later," said Ned without asking. "If the boat wants to," said Conseil, and for a moment I hated him because he always finds exactly the kind of sentence that no one can grasp and that hits everyone. "It wants to," I muttered. The plate purred 3-2-3, content as a choking cat, but on time. I took the cup that once saw whiskey and filled it with water, salty, lying, but wet. I drank. It tasted of order and shame.

Outside, the scraping stopped. I had no idea whether the back was gone or just quieter. Inside, my gaze slid over the chalk again: arrows, numbers, that tiny, cowardly line to the first-aid kit. I blinked, just like that, and swore I briefly saw the tip of the arrow twist into nothingness – like a muscle in sleep. "Is the boat

continuing your lines yet?" I asked Conseil, too tired to mock him. "Not the boat," he said. "We." "Shut your Boy Scout mouth," Ned wheezed, standing as if someone had strung him up and put him down again. He took two steps toward the ladder, then three back, just so no one could say he obeyed.

"Rig up the remaining stock, adjust the wedge, tie up the bilge," Nemo counted like a shopping list. He was back to himself, so we were back to him. The man with the song got water, no thanks, just gravity. Someone raised the cup as if it were a bell. No ringing. Only the beat that replaces everything. Three—two—three. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to spit. I did neither, because fatigue is a religion that tolerates no rituals.

I stood up, rubbed my hands, and my hands smelled of everything we are no longer. The first-aid kit was closed. The arrows were there. My back was gone. Ned was a walk that wouldn't get going. Nemo was a tower that wouldn't topple over. Conseil was chalk and numbers and the thin thread of reason to which we attached our pathetic banner. The Nautilus nodded at us with its belly once more, as if to say, "Nice dancing, you idiots. See you tomorrow." I nodded back, because politeness here is sometimes the only thing that doesn't hurt.

And that's when the small, clean miracle happened, cold as a blade. The longest chalk line on the floor—the one from the pump to the plate—took off at the tip. Nothing major, just a touch; the white skin lifted from the steel, like skin over a vein. The line moved. Two fingers' width, slowly, defiantly. No shock, no wind, no shoe. It crept right up to the hatch seam, paused there, gleamed in the damp yellow for a heartbeat—and stayed. I put my finger on it. Dry. Cold. Clean. Ned saw it, pressed his lips together, said nothing, because even he knew that some lies are too good to be insulted. Conseil put a 1 on the edge. Nemo didn't look. He had the line before we saw it. The boat hummed 3-2-3. And outside, somewhere beyond all this, the great wall turned again, drawing its shadow away like a cloak it will put on again tomorrow.

Explosion of nerves

The first blow came out of nowhere. Not a storm, not a backache outside—a twitch in my stomach, as if the Nautilus had suddenly decided to practice heart palpitations. It smelled of ozone, of burnt dust, of sparks that hadn't yet had the courage to show themselves. The record stumbled, very briefly: 3-2-3 became 2-3-2, like a cough in a metronome. We immediately stood up

straighter, as if posture could mend cables. Conseil was already at the fuse box, finger on the lid, ear close, like a doctor checking if the patient is still lying. "She's hissing," he murmured. Ned laughed dryly. "She's screaming," he said, "and she's about to bite."

Then there was a bang, no thunder, no crash – just a bad*snap*that made every skin crawl. A fuse pouted, lamps flickered, and suddenly the yellow hangover light was a flickering brothel: sometimes too bright, sometimes too dead. Nemo stood close to the panel, hand over air, eyes on his work. "Turn down the power," he said, calmly, like someone who knows that panic consumes electricity. Ned spat on the floor. "Turn up the power," he growled, "or we'll die faster than your cables." Nemo didn't look at him. He only saw the panel, and the panel did what it always does: obeyed him, not us.

My fingers twitched as if someone had soldered wires into them. Every heartbeat was a spark that didn't know where to go. The room crackled, metal hummed, and somewhere in the bulkhead, a small bolt of lightning wandered like a rat. I swore I heard him chuckle. "Disconnect," Conseil said, "listen first, then pull." He patted the box with two fingers as if it were a sleeping dog. Ned tried to rip open the lid. I held him back. "Not yet." "When?" "If it bites us." Ned grinned. "Then I'll bite back."

And just then the world did its thing again. A spark flew out, small, blue, hungry. It didn't jump away. It stayed. It stood in midair, didn't hiss, didn't fall. For a breath, it just hung there, like an insect that decided to forget the rules. Then—and this was the worst part—it crawled back. Not down, not sideways. Backwards, cleanly, slowly, like a fuse being coiled. It disappeared into the stub of the emergency light, and the flame licked contentedly, as if it had just reunited with an old friend. Ned stared. Conseil made a note in chalk. Nemo didn't blink. And the record hummed again, innocently: 3–2–3.

Conseil still had the chalk in his hand, but now he ripped open the first-aid kit. Gauze, iodine, needles—all of it. Behind the last layer lay the packet, brown paper, too tidy for our chaos. He ripped it open, powder falling like a dirty snowfall. "On duty only," he said, and everyone knew that was the cheapest lie that had ever walked through that room. Ned snatched a pinch and shoved it under his tongue, eyes instantly sharper, teeth instantly more dangerous. "Now my heart dances for itself," he grinned. Two others followed, greedily, as if to prove they were no less stupid.

The room vibrated faster. Hands became hummingbirds, fingers tapping metal as if it were skin. One hammered the crank, much too fast, the pump squeaked

in offense. I felt my pulse no longer belong to me, but to the record. 3-2-3, faster and faster, as if Nemo were counting the beat with my aorta. "Calmer," I cried, "slower!" But the voices rose, shrill, hysterical, as if we had an abundance of air. Nemo immediately throttled them, air tighter, until we were gasping. Conseil cursed, "You're killing us," and tied the box shut again, as if one could pack back a sin.

I stared at the pressure indicator. The needle trembled, as always. Then suddenly it stopped. For three beats, it showed nothing, no pressure, no number—just a pulse. Three, two, three. Clean, brutal, right in my skull. Ned laughed, his tongue white with powder, and shouted, "Even the machine is dancing with me!" Conseil scratched a line on the metal, deep, furious, and I knew he would never forget this moment. The needle snapped back to reality, good, correct, as if it had never played hearts. I saw Nemo. His gaze was blank for a second, then he was there again. But that second was longer than any beat.

The fuse box made a scene like a diva who had stewed in the dressing room too long. First an offended hum, then this wet*plack*when insulation gives up and copper is fed up with civilization. The lamps responded immediately: no brightness, just a flickering code – short—short—long, then chaos, then order again, as if someone had given the light a good beating and the filaments were now fighting over grammar. The salon became a church without God, with only ozone and cold anger. "Disconnecting by feeling is suicide," Conseil growled, "we're walking backwards along the tracks." He stomped on the rubber mat, which had already been crushed a thousand times, and drew numbers on the cable terminals with chalk: 1, 2, 3, as if a number could teach electricity manners. I smelled the battery, that heavy, sweet rot that claims it's just chemicals.

"Hands off the main switch," said Nemo, "secondary lines first." He didn't need to shout; the record provided the echo. Air constricted their throats until every word became too expensive. Silence fell into their mouths like a brick. Ned, pupils as wide as need, grinned with powdered teeth. "I feel where the fire's burning," he hissed, running the back of his hand just along the tracks, closer than any prudent man would. A hair on his arm stood up and smoked. "Hot enough," he laughed. "Sufficient," Conseil corrected, pressing a piece of wet canvas into his fist. "When it sizzles, throw it on. Not before." "I'll throw it in your face if you keep babbling." "Then at least hit the beat," Conseil said dryly.

We ran down cables, each with a task that smelled less like a plan than of desperation: loosening a clamp, pulling a bridge, sparks bouncing, cursing

curses. A screw-believer held the flashlight, shaft between his teeth, and the light trembled as if afraid to fall into our eyes. The safety cable sang—a feverish, thin chirp you hear more in your teeth than in your ears. I slid my fingers under a warm cable, the insulation soft as skin, and thought of all the wrong bodies I'd once loved. "Grounding," said Conseil, "who has it?" No one answered. "So no one," he said. "Then we're all one. Again."

A short bang, the lamp above the wedge doesn't burst, it bulges as if trying to burp, and remains intact. Inside, it continues to flicker, insulted, like a stomach that's had too much talk. "Screw lamps," Ned wheezed, "I just need shadows to slay him." "Who?" "Everyone." I kicked him in the calf, not gently, just to get his blood flowing again. He snarled, grinned, ran the canvas over the clamp, it hissed, stank, but the sound was the good one: a tired "ah," when heat and water agree not to celebrate a wedding today.

"To your right," said Nemo. He didn't point, he just said it, and yet everyone knew which right arm he meant. I laid my back against the bulkhead so the world wouldn't push me backward out of the room, and bridged a copper band around a dead spot. The screw refused to turn, the nut played dead, and my hands became tools that no longer needed me. Miniature circuits crackled in my fingers—no pain, just threat. "Force," I murmured, and the head of the screw gave way, twisting, grasping, clicking:*there*The record nodded slightly, 3-2-3, as if it had smeared my small triumph onto its record.

The salon spoke in flickering blurs. Not a sentence, only syllables of shadows: on—off—on—off—on——off. Conseil answered with numbers: "Three—two—three." He didn't clap—hands were expensive—but his voice pushed the air into rectangular pieces, and we breathed through those edges. A sailor reached for the wrong cable; I swatted his hand away. "Are you crazy?" He didn't cry, but his eyes glittered like poorly laid tin. "I just want it to stop." "It never stops," I said. "It just changes the name."

Ned tugged on the emergency flare as if it were a fuse for courage. "Leave it," said Conseil. "When it gets dark?" "It won't. He won't let it go." He meant Nemo. He stood there, a tower with three hands, and the Nautilus listened to his spine. Air a touch tighter so no one would scream; work a touch lighter so his fingers would still obey; light in the yellow mockery. Nemo blinked once too long—a blank stare, a hole in which his eyes briefly couldn't find the world—then he was steel again. "Sub-branch three dead," I reported. "Bridge two alive," cried the screw-believer. "Fuse five hot," said Conseil. "I'm hot," grinned Ned, "ugh, Mother, don't touch me." "Touch yourself," I gasped. "I've been doing it for years," he said, and laughed so fake that the room shook its head.

The cables became more honest the less they had. The smell changed from ozone to copper to rubbery humility. I pressed the rubber mat deeper with my heel so the current wouldn't decide to take the direct route through my bones today. The battery hummed like an insect nest, impersonal, efficient, without hate—the most unpleasant kind of power. "Two more clamps," said Conseil, "then reset the plate." "No reset," said Nemo, "just order." His voice cut through the din, turning noise back into news.

I raised my eyes, just to avoid the shame in the lamb's glow—and saw them. Three small sparks, not loud, not large. High on my forehead. No source. No dirt for them to cling to. They just hung there like badly behaved stars. One blinked briefly, the second twice, the third long. 3-2-3. Clean. Mean. They weren't floating, they were waiting. Ned froze. Conseil pressed his lips together as if he had to sign something he hated. "Don't touch," Nemo said, as if we were children. No one moved. The sparks finished blinking their silent judgment, went out simultaneously—and left the air tasting as if someone had written in it:*continue working*.

The argument erupted like a boil. It wasn't a big deal—one wrong look, a shoulder bump on the pump, and Ned was already neck-deep in the screw-believer who hissed, "Watch out, line!" as if he owned wires and God. Fists, elbows, the kind of closeness that only knows two kinds: sex or murder. "Get down!" Conseil snarled, but words were now shards of glass. They slipped into the mouth, cut the tongue, and fell back out again. "Air," one barked. "Light," another yelled. "You," Ned growled, and "you" was a judgment. He slammed the guy against the bulkhead, metal singing briefly, offended. The fuse box laughed like a cough.

Nemo only needed one finger. He ran it a millimeter across the air indicator, polite as a waiter pulling your plate away before you're full. The air became razor-sharp. Suddenly, every breath was a contract with fine print. Throats shrank, words broke. "Let go!" became "Lo–." "Hold him!" became "Ha–." Curses became animals being walked on an empty leash. I grabbed Ned by the collar, smelled powder, whiskey, the old port, all in a breath too short for two. "Suffocate later," I gasped, "work now." He bared his teeth, a tin smile. "I'm working on his face."

Conseil pushed us apart with his shoulders, no hero, just mass on wheels. "Isolate three!" he shouted, "Release clamp four!" The screw-believer gasped for air again, yanked at his own throat as if he could loosen the throttle with his fingers. "Breathe in time, you donkey," Conseil pressed, "short—short—long." He slapped the rhythm into the men's shoulder blades, three beats, two, three,

until muscles obeyed because brains were becoming too expensive. Ned struck again, a flat hook, more form than substance; then he let go, not out of insight, but because his body understood that oxygen is the only currency Nemo doesn't counterfeit.

The lamp above us flickered like an animal not knowing whether to bite or flee. The fuse box spat a smoldering insult, a cable howled through teeth it didn't have. We moved closer to the rails, laid wet canvas on the hot spot, until it smelled only of burnt rubber instead of decision. "Economize language," Conseil gasped, "hoard numbers." He counted, we nodded, the record nodded along: 3-2-3. Ned shot one more look at the screw-believer—the kind of look that makes you go into debt—then wiped his forehead on his sleeve, rubbed ozone into his skin, and reluctantly stayed there.

And then the room ran out of syntax. Not us—the walls. At first it was just an echo: our breathing commands, bounced off, shaky. Then I heard answers, without mouths, without men. Dry, tinny, as if language sat behind the metal and had a duty roster. We: "Three—two—three." The wall: "Two—three—two." No echo, no coincidence. A countervoice. We: "Short—short—long." The wall: "Short—long—short." I shivered, even though my skin was boiling. Ned froze, his pupils needle-thin. Conseil raised his hand as if he could catch the voice. Nemo didn't move at all. His face was a door without a handle.

The countervoice remained matter-of-fact, like an accountant from hell. It didn't name names, just beats. It foisted the wrong rhythm on us like carrion. A man on the hose almost fell for it—his foot went out of step, the pump choked, the bilge gurgled mockingly. "Don't listen!" Conseil insisted, "just count!" I nailed my tongue to the roof of my mouth so as not to waste a "Who's there?" Ned whispered very quietly, "I hear you, you bastard," to the wall, or to the captain, or to himself.

The air remained sharp, but it held. We remained sharp, but we held. The fuse box growled in offense and fell silent, the lamps returned to their yellow battlefield. I placed my hand on the bulkhead, felt vibrations no ear can record—and right then, the wall answered one last time, cleanly, briefly, contemptuously: "Two—three—two." Without a mouth, without sound pressure. Just metal claiming the right to voice. And when I pulled my hand away, the imprint of my fingers in the condensation wasn't where it should have been. It was sideways, perpendicular to gravity, three fingers short, two short, one longer—a cold, ridiculous salute in counter-beat.

One of the screw-believers reached for the line at the wrong moment. No order, no signal—just nervous twitching and stupidity. He grabbed a rail so hot it sang and pulled reflexively. Immediately, the bilge vomited back, a jet of steam shooting from the gap in the hose like a little dragon that had decided to be in a bad mood. The man's scream was drowned out by the hiss, skin taking on a new pattern, red, wet, alive. He fell back, and we all rushed toward him at once, not out of love, but because panic pulls us together like magnets.

"Pull the trigger!" Conseil yelled, pressing the canvas against the arm that looked like an open pipe. "Hold still, hold still!" "I'm not holding anything!" the man howled, but his voice was already a static. Ned gave a short, fake laugh, spat gunpowder residue into the bulkhead, and yanked back the handle with his other hand. "You see, even the bilge has more courage than you!" "Shut up!" I gasped, feeling my hands tremble, not from fear, but from the current crawling through the room like a stray dog looking for new legs.

The steam didn't hang as steam should. It didn't rise. It didn't fall either. It rolled downward, heavy as wet lead, settling on the ground like a second, dirty skin. We trudged through the fog, blind, every step a question mark. Conseil yelled orders, numbers that were louder than words. Nemo raised his hand to the slab, lowered work, as if to show us that even sweat can be regulated. The man on the ground whimpered, and the whimpering was worse than any explosion because it reminded us that we still had room to fall.

The room was a bundle of nerves, shiny, twitching, full of small explosions that didn't need a bomb. Conseil pressed the wet canvas onto the rail, his fingers white as if they held the spine of the world. "Don't release it!" he yelled. The man on the ground groaned, every sound a rusty nail in his ear. Ned danced beside him, his pupils glowing from the powder, beating time with his knuckles against the wall, short—short—long. He grinned because he knew he was provoking the boat. I wanted to kick his head in and kiss him at the same time, because at least he still had the courage to disguise stupidity with music.

Nemo stood at the plate, motionless, finger over air, eyes on light. And then: a blackout. Only a second, but it lasted longer than all my anger. His face blank, eyes as if switched off. He was no captain, no god, no judge—just flesh that had missed the connection. The plate slipped, air fluttered, work faltered, light twitched in offense. We all saw it. Ned laughed, "See? Even the Pope has a broken cable!" Conseil yelled at him, "Shut the corner of your mouth!" Nemo returned, as abruptly as a surge of electricity. "Order," he said. And the plate obeyed, dutifully, disgustingly.

I knelt by the chronometer, seeking support in numbers. The second hand jumped cleanly, obediently—then suddenly it raced, double speed, for three beats. My eyes could barely follow, like a galloping heart. Then it stopped, fell back into normal time, without catching up, without debt. No trace that it had just devoured the future. I swallowed, wanted to scream, but didn't. Ned stared too, his pupils dilated as if they had found a new god. "Time dances with me," he whispered, and I knew he meant it.

Conseil tied the man's burned hand, tightening the strap as if he could also use it to hold the world in place. "He's still alive," he gasped. "Still." Ned stamped his feet once in counter-beat, just so we could hear him. Nemo breathed evenly, as if he didn't need us. And the Nautilus continued to vibrate, 3-2-3, but in my ear, the alien beat still ticked, coming and going as it pleased.

The cables were finally quiet. No more sparks, no more whining in the box, just the usual hum, that stubborn, disgusting song of lead and copper. We stood there as if after a fight where no one had won: arms heavy, eyes flickering, nerves still on edge. Conseil wiped away the sweat with his chalky hand, drawing lines across his forehead without realizing it. "Reset complete," he muttered, but it sounded as if he'd borrowed the words from a corpse. The burned man groaned, his hand looking like a piece of meat that would never grasp anything again. Ned knelt beside him, his pupils dilated, his mouth full of powdered truths. "He's alive," he grinned, "because I gave him air." Bullshit, but he believed it.

Nemo was still standing at the plate, motionless, the pointer beneath his fingers like a pet. His eyes weren't on us, not on the cables, not on Borel under the sheet. They were briefly somewhere else, in a hole I didn't want to see. Then he blinked and was back here. "All right," he said quietly. No one answered. Because we'd all seen that blink. The crack. The second it was gone. And we knew it would come back. And for longer.

The crew collected shards, scraps of canvas, courage that wasn't courage. One laughed too high, too shrill, until Conseil stuffed his mouth with gauze. One prayed, quietly, but he confused "Lord" with "air," and I knew the prayer was going to the wrong address. Ned stomped, stomped, did the push-pull again, just one beat. Short—long—short. No one reacted. Not even the wall. But we'd all heard it, and that was enough.

Outside, the back passed by. Closer, so close that the glass vibrated like a drumhead. No jolt, no shock, just that shitty, self-conscious flicker. Nemo didn't raise his head. He didn't have to. The back knew long ago that we heard him. I

imagined him laughing outside. Not a whale. Not a shark. Something that exercises patience. And hunger.

We grabbed the cable scraps, tied them, and closed the box again, as if that would help us contain the chaos. The smell of ozone remained, burning our tongues, our hair, our skin. Ned rubbed the powder between his fingers, grinning like someone secretly drinking lighter fluid. Conseil wrote a line on the bulkhead: "alive." No one asked who he meant. Maybe the man with the burned hand. Maybe us. Maybe the boat.

The record hummed obediently again: 3-2-3, 3-2-3. But exactly once, just one beat, it switched to 2-3-2. By itself. No finger, no command. A wink of steel. Then order returned, as if nothing had happened. I saw it. Ned saw it. Conseil saw it. Nemo pretended he hadn't noticed. But we knew he had felt it. And that the winker wasn't human.

A whale as an enemy image

The back came back, broader than the night, and brushed against the hull as if it wanted to peel off our skin. Glass vibrated as if it were the skin of a drum, and the bulkhead sweated salt as if it were afraid. Nemo stood close to the plate, his fingers on air as always, his gaze somewhere deeper as always. "Whale," he said, quietly, as if performing a christening. No proof, no doubt—from now on, the thing outside would be called a whale. Period. The crew nodded, because it was better to have a word than to have to deal with this nameless cockroach in their heads.

Conseil drew rings on the glass with chalk, small circles, then lines, like targets for a god who never came. "Clicks count," he murmured. "Every touch, every pause." Ned huffed, his nose still full of powder, grinning like someone already living in the beast's throat. "I don't need chalk," he spat, "I see him like that." I hated how much truth there was in that sentence. The back outside wasn't an illusion—it was patience in the flesh.

The plate drew air closer, work higher, light lower. Every breath was now a price unacceptable. "He feels us," someone murmured. Nemo nodded, and the boat nodded along, 3-2-3, good, obedient. I put my hand to the glass, felt vibrations that weren't just scratching—it was language, but in a grammar known only to bones.

And then the thing happened that no rulebook liked: Condensation gathered, moving slowly, heavily, across the pane. No drops, no streaks. A shape. A fin, clearly defined, as if someone had drawn a knife through the water outside and left a scar inside. It lasted a heartbeat, maybe two, then dissolved into harmless drops that looked as if they'd never known anything. Ned grinned. "See, he's already waving." Nemo didn't look up. He didn't need to.

The belly of the Nautilus became a workshop church, and everyone had an altar: battery, clamps, rope, sweat. "Rigging," said Nemo in the voice of a man who had long since rigged everything, including his sins. We moved the junk together, which suddenly made sense: an old grappling hook pole, bent like a bad memory; two lengths of thick copper, still warm from just now; a rubber mat with bite marks; strips of canvas soaked in spirit; an emergency flare that looked as if it finally wanted to be a good reason. Conseil numbered, not for the love of order, but because numbers are the only language that respects electricity. "One: hook. Two: cable on hook, double winding, U over V, reverse arc. Three: insulating tape missing, so canvas around it. Four: return to rail, here." He typed, chalk leaving white scars on black metal, as if he were tattooing prayers on the boat.

Ned sniffed again, his pupils like two small moons that only know low tide. "More fire," he grinned, "less preaching." "You want to bang," I said, "we want to hit." "I want to hit so it bangs," he corrected, pulling the canvas strap tighter as if to straighten the hook's spine. His hands were fast, too fast; the powder turned fingers into hummingbirds and patience into an insult. "Not too tight," grumbled Conseil, "the winding needs to breathe." "My winding only breathes with cursing," Ned retorted, cursing. It helped. The copper lay, bent, clung to iron like a lousy hug that still held.

The battery hummed. No song, just power. "Switch," said Conseil. "We don't have one." "We'll make one," said Nemo. "I'll make two," grinned Ned. "One in front, one in my veins." I covered my mouth to prevent any anger from spilling out, which I would need later. We chose the emergency flare handle as the trigger, a leather lever that had been misused a thousand times and today finally had its purpose. Copper to clamp, clamp to handle, handle to hook; return line to the rail to the left of the fuse box, tongue dry, fingers wet; rubber mat under the boots of the person firing the fire; canvas cuff around the pole, thick, generous, as if to protect it from ourselves.

"Air down an eighth," said Nemo, "Work up a quarter. He who ignites, breathes in time, not heroically." Air pinched the throat, work filled the arms, the light sank into that yellow judgment that always finds you guilty. I held the bar, felt

how old metal can be when you shove promises into its grooves. Ned placed his fingers on my knuckle. "If you tremble, I'll ignite." "If you breathe, I'll count." "I breathe when he screams," he said, and outside, the back stroked us again, as if he'd just been asked.

Conseil made a chalk circle on the floor, indicating the location of the pole, marked arrows to the lock, and placed 1-2-3 on the steps. "No one stumbles, no one is heroic," he said, "Heroism is a hole in the pipe." The screw-believer with the freshly bandaged hand held the return pipe for us, shaking in a controlled manner, his teeth so tight they could grind a new name for him. "Don't fall," I said. "I'll fall later," he retorted. The lounge smelled of ozone, of iodine, of a pharmacy in a harbor bar. The fuse box growled softly, a disapproving "leave me out of this"—and, of course, he was right in the middle of it.

We placed the rubber mat against the airlock hatch, where metal becomes too curious. Nemo stood behind the plate, not looking, and knew everything. "Contact window short," he said, "only on graze, not on impact. No hunting sound. You're hands, not throats." Ned laughed soundlessly. "I'm a throat with fists." "You're a problem with talent," I murmured, and he grinned as if I'd adopted him. The crew held the pole as if holding a knife on the wrong end. Conseil checked every coil, every seam, as if he were stitching a seam on the world. "Canvas wet enough," he said, and the smell of alcohol stabbed into my memory like a police hoof.

I thought of Borel under the cloth, of the coin, of the spoon, of the list. No room for the pastor, only room for electricity. "If he touches," said Nemo, "wait two strikes, on the third strike. The third is long." "3-2-3," said three men simultaneously, like drunks sharing the same curse. The plate nodded. The back outside gave us a small*tsch*. Glass vibrated. I felt with my wrist where the trembling was. "Stand," said Conseil. "Stand," I repeated. "Stand," Ned commanded the sea.

The pole now lay against the hatch like a spear that's learned to be polite. The return line taut like a nasty rope. I raised my eyes to escape the yellow light and saw the chalk on the glass making targets: rings, lines, small numbers that looked as if they could read the back. "You steer," I said to Nemo. "I'll order," he said. "And if he rams us?" "Then the boat will calculate ahead of you."

Ned rubbed powder between his finger and gums once more. "Now I hear him laughing," he whispered. "He's not laughing," said Conseil. "He's calculating how much of us he can fit inside." "I can't fit inside him," Ned growled. "He fits

inside me." And I knew he meant it with all the idiot honor he had left. The battery sang deeper. The fuse box held its breath. The air became thin, like lies.

"Test," said Conseil. The screw-believer tapped the return line, a brief kiss of sparks at the clamp, the canvas hissed, the pole held up. "Go," he said. "Go," we repeated, because repetition eases vertigo. Nemo raised two fingers, lowered them, and the plate pushed Work a grain of sand higher. My forearms burned, my fingers became hooks. I set the pole, half an inch of clearance, the kind of clearance that only makes sense if you're about to destroy it. The boat tensed like a cat pretending to be a church.

And then, with all the audacity the last few days had accumulated, the loose end of the second cable, which we had just blindly put aside for later, did something I won't tell anyone who loves physics. It lifted, a breath, as if it had a tongue. A fine flicker of light leaped forward, not away from the bare copper, but towards it. Sparks licked backward into the insulation, eating into it like embers in wet wood—still, clean, against direction, against reason. For a moment the world stood and watched, then pretended it hadn't seen. Conseil held his breath. Ned grinned as if the devil had winked at him. Nemo didn't blink. And the record hummed, dutifully as always: 3–2–3.

The back outside responded. No accident, no wave. Three clicks, clean through the hull, so precise it shook our bones.*Tch—tch—tch.*Pause. Two clicks, deeper, closer. Pause. Three clicks, hard again, like nails in wood. 3-2-3. Conseil immediately picked up his chalk, drew lines on the glass, noted pauses as if translating the language of a god. Ned grinned, his pupils two black holes full of powder, and pounded his fist against the wall, keeping the rhythm. "He's talking!" he shouted. "He's talking to my beat!" Nemo didn't even raise his head. "He's not saying anything. He's timing us." His voice was quieter than the crackling outside, and that was precisely why I believed him less.

The pressure gauge vibrated, not from water, but from those clicks. The needle didn't quiver as usual, but rather hacked like a Morse code. I swore I saw it form words for a beat, small movements that didn't fit with the rest. The crew stared, mouths open, as if they smelled the gods. "Whale," repeated Nemo. "Whale." Conseil wrote: 3-2-3. Ned shouted, "He's dancing with us!" I thought: He's laughing at us.

The record stumbled, slipping into 2-3-2, as if it had briefly forgotten who was in charge. My heart made the same mistake, and I felt the entire room sweating in unison. Then the machine settled down, obediently, dutifully, 3-2-

3. Everything was back to normal. Except in our heads. There, the clicking continued, deeper, louder, closer.

And just then it came – three clicks, this time not through steel, not through water. Directly in my ear. No echo, no sound, just in my skull. Clean, clear: 3-2-3. I covered my ears, but it didn't help. Ned laughed, Conseil scribbled, Nemo didn't blink. And the Nautilus nodded along, as if it had just decided it didn't need our interlocutor anymore.

Nemo turned the chaos into a sermon. He stood at the plate like a priest at his altar, his fingers just above the slides, as if air were a communion wafer and work the chalice. "Quiet," he said, and the crew choked on the word. He talked about angles, about distance, about breathing in time—as if hunting were nothing more than administration. "No shouting. No stamping. Just steps. Just numbers." His voice was dry, but it bit into their bones. The men nodded, not because they believed, but because the rhythm compelled them.

Ned grinned like a dog, foaming at the mouth. "Screw angles. Screw rules. Up air, down work!" He seized the rhythm, stamping his feet in counter-beat, making the floor vibrate with insult. Two men roared along, hoarse and angry. Conseil slammed the chalk on the wall, counting loudly, shouting over everything: "Three—two—three!" His numbers were life preservers, but the water was full of teeth. I saw the eyes flicker—some following Nemo, some following Ned, none following themselves.

The Nautilus responded, of course. Two screws on the wall, loose for days, audibly tightened even a quarter turn.*Click. Click.*In time, damn it. 3-2-3. The record nodded, Nemo didn't smile. Ned laughed, dirty and triumphant: "Even the screws know I'm right!" Conseil shook his head, dragging the chalk across the floor as if he were trying to spin a net to keep us together for another minute. I kicked, stomped, breathed—and knew: we're already dancing, but not to our song.

The back came back, sliding along the hull, a shadow with too much time. Glass vibrated, chalk marks on the window wobbled as if trying to change position. "Now," whispered Nemo, "window coming." We hoisted the power lance to the lock, copper hook in front, return line taut, rubber mat under our boots, hands sweating on the handle. The battery hummed lower, as if afraid of being forced. Ned puffed powder air, his nose full of hunger, and whispered, "I'll give him a good beating." Conseil counted clicks, whispering them into the glass, a litany without God: "One, two, three."

The air became thinner, Nemo turned so no one would shout heroically, but breathe shallowly, like cattle. Hands became lighter, legs stumbled almost by themselves into the rhythm, short—short—long. The back outside brushed, we raised the pole, copper against steel, tension against patience. "Not yet," said Conseil. "Not yet," I repeated. Ned grinned, "I can't wait." "Then die quietly," I growled. And the boat tensed like a muscle.

And then the small miracle happened: bubbles, a whole swarm, dissolved outside, not rising as they should. They came sideways, sliding through the glass as if water had been forgotten. They stood in the middle of the salon, floating, round, a wreath of pearls. They pulsed in a 3-2-3 beat, as if they'd stolen our lungs. One burst silently, and I swore the drop landed in my hair. Ned laughed, Conseil counted, Nemo wasn't looking. The bubbles remained, cheeky, until the boat itself breathed them away.

The third blow came as agreed, the long one.*Tch—tch—TCH.*The back brushed, lingering a breath too close to us, and the boat lifted its chin like a boxer being held back. "Now," said Nemo, not loudly, not solemnly—just like someone tightening a screw. I rammed the pole forward, copper kissing steel, return line taut, rubber matting under my boots a pitiful faith. Ned didn't bellow a heroic poem; he just snarled, "Take it, you fat nothing." Conseil counted, flatly, dryly, a liturgy: "one—two—three." On "three," I pressed the leather switch.

The battery screamed. Not high, not low, but like flesh that understands electricity. The lamp stopped acting up, it was almost dead; all the light retreated into a thin yellow cord that trembled on the ceiling like a last nerve. The pole twitched in my hands as if it had decided to take me with it. The return wire yanked at the rail like a dog on a chain that finally has a reason to bite. It immediately stank of pharmacy and steak, of ozone and grilled depths, of everything water isn't supposed to smell like. The salon became smaller, breathing shorter, the beat louder. 3-2-3 pounded in my skull, while beneath my skin my fingers decided to become hummingbirds.

Outside, there was no thunder, no dramatic heave. Just a brief, offended jerk through the hull, as if someone had turned a butcher's knife. Glass vibrated, writing a dental splint on my forehead. The chalk rings on the viewing window shimmered, wanting to slide but not being allowed to. Ned laughed, the bastard, short, bright, almost amorous. "Hit," he gasped, "Hit, you heaven without a god!" The screw-believer with the bandage held the return line like a cross, as if he could prevent some kind of resurrection by pressing harder. Conseil pushed the canvas cuff higher for me, his fingers cold and sharp, an

emergency doctor who no longer asks questions because answers down here only cost blood.

"Hold!" said Nemo, and we stopped. Not out of respect, just because the current pinned us down. The pole vibrated, my wrist vibrated with it, my heart stumbled and still found the rhythm: short—short—long. A hiss through the pole, a bark through the battery, and somewhere deep in the boat, something made a contented*pf*Like a valve that's allowed to kiss its destiny. I smelled water that glowed and salt that suddenly tasted like coins. The air tightened, Nemo didn't move a millimeter, as if he were training us the way dogs are trained: on a leash, with patience, without love.

A spark leaped from the pole to the hatch, caught mid-jump, an ugly, blue splinter in the air, and then, very slowly, unbearably politely, turned back into the copper, as if homesick. I was sweating so hard my eyes brimmed with salt. Ned pressed his forehead against my upper arm to see if I was shaking. I was shaking. He grinned. "That's what truth feels like," he whispered, "it burns and it's not worth it, but you do it anyway." "Shut up," I gasped, "and hold on." He held on. His hands were clamps of dirt.

Outside, the back twitched—a blow, just one, not a second. No blowhole, no song. A silent "enough" that our bones heard. The Nautilus took the "enough" and turned it into "more." The plate purred again, 3-2-3, as if we had just stroked a fuse. The light came back, offended, thin. The smell remained, that burnt water that must not exist. Conseil looked at the battery: hot, but not angry; alive, but offended. "Separation," said Nemo. I lifted my finger from the leather switch, slowly, as if giving a name to a wound. The bar stopped singing. My hands took longer.

"Well?" Ned, his pupils two black mouths. "Does he tell his children?" "If he has any, he eats them," I said. The screw-believer laughed, so short it was more like a cough. The chalk rings on the glass stood still again, outrageously well-behaved, only deep scratch lines now ran diagonally down the pane like musical notations for idiots. Nemo stared, not into the glass, not at us—into nothingness. His eyes were a hole, a tiny blackout behind his forehead. "All right," he said, without a voice, only with his mouth. The plate nodded, obediently like a dog about to bite again.

I wanted to know the time, just to have something that wouldn't lie. I looked at the chronometer—and the thing did what time shouldn't. The minute hand jumped to twelve, the hour hand to twelve, the second hand to zero. All zero. For two seconds, the clock stood at midnight in hell, clean, without a twitch, as

if someone were holding a wet cloth against the world. For two beats, it was "never." My throat went*empty*Ned whispered, "Holy—" and broke off. Conseil held his breath, as if he could memorize it. Then—click—the hands continued running, properly, correctly, no memory, no catching up, as if no one had seen the zero except us crazy people.

"Cut and secure," Nemo said, now like a human again. We pulled back the pole, the canvas steamed, the copper smelled of guilt. The screw-believer disconnected the return line, his burned hand a red map without cities. Ned kissed the pole—no joke—and then spat on the ground so no one would think he loved tools. "Again," he breathed. "If he touches it again." Conseil drew a line in the log, so deep the chalk broke. "If he touches it again," he repeated, and his tone didn't betray greed. It was math.

The Nautilus acted as if nothing had happened. 3-2-3. 3-2-3. I was breathing along to the beat like a bad dog. Outside, it was quiet, that thick, offended silence that reeks of a change of plans. I pressed my forehead against the bulkhead, felt warm steel, heard my blood, and somewhere very far away, a laugh that might as well have been a burble. "He'll be back," said Ned. "Or we will," I said. Nemo said nothing. But his silence was the worst, because it sounded like "plan."

The reverberation smelled of burnt water and metal breath. The battery hummed deeper, offended, but no longer hysterical. We stood there, our hands full, trembling, as if someone had poured a small residue of electricity into each of our bones. The pole lay crosswise on two crates, still steaming, the canvas oozed spirit, which immediately evaporated in the air. Ned leaned against the lock, grinding his jaw, pupils too large for his face. "Again," he whispered, not to me, not to Nemo—to the back that had just left, or merely moved further back. Conseil didn't wipe away the chalk rings on the glass; he only drew a small notch through each one, a date without a calendar, so that the machine would know later what it had already taken from us.

The scratches on the pane were longer than you'd care to admit—slanted, tough, as if scratched into wet leather with a machete. I could have sworn one of them was new and started only three finger-widths below the old one, as if something outside had grabbed at it, realizing we could respond. "Whale," someone said, awed like an idiot in a museum. "Enemy," Nemo corrected, and his tone made the word heavy as lead in the stomach. The plate acted as if it had an opinion—air a touch tighter, work stopped, light remained in the yellow court. We became calmer, but no better.

The screw-believer with the red map for a hand sat there holding the return line as if it were a child who'd forgotten how to scream. "One more time," Ned croaked again, and this time it was a plea. "If he touches again," said Conseil, "and if the battery isn't lying." He put his fingers to the rails, testing for warmth like a butcher tests meat. "Hot, but not offended." "He's coming back," grinned Ned, "I feel him." "You feel powder," I said. "Powder feels me," he growled, and I felt the coming evening in his teeth.

The crew stood around in disarray: half with their shoulders hunched forward, their hands already on the bar as if they were magnets. The other half with their gazes going up and down the ladder like a prayer wheel. One muttered "Heave—," broke off, coughed ozone. One stole with his eyes: the leather switch, the clamp, the last scrap of canvas. Borel continued to sleep under his sheet, Coin somewhere in between, the kind of calm you only feel when you know she has nothing to do with us anymore. I smelled my shirt—iodine, tar, cold whiskey—and thought it would take a year to wash the stench out of that day. We don't have years down here.

"Hunt, don't pray," said Nemo. "Plan." He took a half step toward the plate, a finger's breadth above air, as if holding a dog by an invisible collar. "Short window, long-stroke power only, release return first if—" He fell silent for half a second, too long for a man who acts as if time belongs to him. The silence had taste. Copper. Then his voice was back, clean, controlled. "—if I say so. Not if you want to feel it." "I feel it anyway," Ned snarled, "whether you say so or not." "You feel what I let you," said Nemo. No sound was uttered louder than that.

Conseil scribbled three arrows on the edge of the chalk circles—not outward, but inward, into the room. "Reverberation," he muttered. "False resonance." "What the hell is false resonance?" I asked. "When the beat stays in the room even though nothing outside is beating anymore. As if the metal had recited us and doesn't want to admit it." He was right. It was still clicking inside me, a quiet, private Morse code that no ear can turn off. 3-2-3. And beneath the click lay another, false, push-pull. 2-3-2. The shit spat in my throat.

"Water," said the man with the burned hand, and I handed him the cup. He drank; the water tasted sarcastic. "Tastes like regret," he said. "Remorse is sold out," Ned retorted. "We take anger." He tapped the pole with two fingers, as if announcing its next dance partner. I wanted to tell him I knew his courage-as-drama costume. Instead, I said nothing. Some kinds of anger are leases you can't break without losing the roof.

The battery settled to a clean hum, which I hate because it's honest. The fuse box murmured softly, as if relaying bad jokes. The glass was blind enough again to feign bravery. "One more test," said Conseil. "No," said Nemo. "Why?" "Because greed eats electricity." He twisted Luft even tighter, imperceptibly, but throats know more than eyes. A collective "hnn" went through the faces. "You're suffocating us in advance," coughed Ned. "I'm not drowning you," said Nemo. "I'm stopping you." "With luck," spat Ned. "With millimeters," corrected Nemo.

The back didn't come. Maybe he was deeper. Maybe just offended. Maybe he counted to a thousand because he can. We stood and pretended we weren't waiting, but growing. One man re-wrapped the canvas, as carefully as if it were a gift. Another ran the flat of his hand over the rubber mat, as if he could sanctify it. I counted my fingers, just to count something that was mine. Five, five. Good. I put the back of my hand to the glass again and felt nothing but my own pulse. The pulse was an asshole. He pretended it was coming from outside.

"Clean up," Nemo finally said, "and be ready." It sounded like "confession." No one left. We just pretended to clean up more slowly: pole on boxes, clamps back, wipe down the rail, rubber mat on the edge, as if order could straighten our spines. Ned stayed at the window. "I see you," he whispered, as if he were nine and going after a fish that only exists in the mind. "I see you, you fat fairy tale." Conseil wrote "Contact 1" through "Contact 5" on the edge of the grid, even though we only had two. Heard ahead. Sometimes hope is just advance stock.

I remembered the coin again. That small sum we'd slipped into the dead man's pocket, who ended up staying with us. I searched for it with my eyes. And there it was: not down on the cloth, not on the floor. Inside, on the glass, where it had been gossiping since the whiskey chapter. High up, just below the center line of Conseil's target, firm, as if the glass had magnets that only stick to dead people. I raised the cup and pointed at it. Ned grinned. "He's already paid," he said, "we can go into debt."

The air tightened even more. A murmur of tiredness rolled through the men. Nemo stood, and his silence smelled of cold iron. I hated the calm he imposed on us, and was grateful for it because my hands still reached for electricity when there was nothing. "Sentry at the lock," Conseil ordered, without realizing he was doing it. Two nodded. "Check the wedge," said the screw-believer, who suddenly had his voice back. The wedge responded with a self-satisfied*mm*. Survival is vanity, even with wood.

And then two things simultaneously delivered that little pang you only notice when you've already seen too much. First: the Nautilus, the holy, ugly plate, cold and all-powerful, set itself—without finger, without command—for exactly one beat at 2-3-2. A millimeter jerk, a single false breath of steel. Second: the coin inside the glass, the small, silent obolus, made a quarter turn, slowly, audible like a tongue click, even though metal has no say. 2-3-2—*click*– and again 3-2-3. We all stood. Ned grinned too broadly. Conseil wrote without looking. Nemo pretended it was wind. But my skin knew it was a wink, not from a whale. From the boat.

Drugs and rebellion

The first-aid kit had a hole, so neat, as if someone had carefully folded it for theft. Gauze on the left, iodine on the right, pins in the middle like small, offended skewers—and behind it, what had been shoving into our eyes for the past few hours: brown paper, torn open, empty only if you don't look closely. Conseil looked closely. He lifted the lid, held his breath, and took two fingerfuls of crumbs from the fold left by the day. Dust, not much, but enough to speed up a room. "Secure it," he said, dryly, as if he were talking about screws. Ned was already there, mouth crooked, pupils black as if freshly painted. "Secure it is good," he grinned, "let's secure it within ourselves."

"Office medicine," he called it, with the impudent tenderness of port priests wrapping sin in incense. "For work, for courage, for justice." I laughed, without humor, just so the air would realize it hadn't yet ruled us. "Justice is a knife without a handle," I said. Ned shrugged. "Then wrap it with teeth." Conseil fetched the tin cup, tapped the crumbs into it, mixed with a sliver of water that tasted of metal. The cup still smelled of yesterday's whiskey, a sordid marriage: pharmacy and bar. "Only in measured doses," Nemo growled from the stove, without coming over. The air drew in tighter, half a tooth, enough to turn sentences into bursts.

The crew smelled the stuff before they saw it. Eyes lifted like dog ears. Hands became bags, groping for grounds. Ned tapped his knuckle against the cup—clack—and distributed with a casualness that reeked of practice: a stroke on the back of the hand here, a touch on the gums there, a fingernail for the man with the trembling hand, burned from a moment ago. "Only he who runs gets it," he muttered, and our boots began to talk about how running could once again be a language. "Stop," said Conseil, hard enough for even the tin to hear.

He took the spoon—the old whiskey judge—dipped it into the cup, let the drop rest on the edge, and divided: "A touch, no more." Ned grinned. "A touch is a start."

I took nothing. I lied so loudly that my tongue squeaked, but I still let myself have a whiff. It tasted of the harbor and the train station and the kind of courage you later regret, if at all. The lamps made their yellow dish that finds every skin guilty. The battery hummed warmly, like a cat deciding to tolerate you. The wedge creaked in the bulkhead, insulted. Borel lay beneath his shawl, Münze somewhere in between, the only one here to whom the rhythm no longer dictates.

The stuff soaked in, did what it can: It turned hands into hummingbirds, fingers into pincers, tongues into sirens. Thoughts came faster, and because they came faster, they looked wiser. Ned laughed softly, an out-of-tune instrument that you play anyway when the evening drags on. "Work it on," Nemo commanded, and the record obeyed him like a dog that has already forgotten why it obeys. Breathe down a breath. We didn't pant—we snarled. "Just as long as you keep time," Nemo said. "What if we do it better?" Ned snarled. "Then you'll lose it," Nemo retorted.

Conseil placed the cup in the middle of the bench and drew a thin circle around it with chalk. "No one bumps into anything," he said, as if order were a religion that could still be saved. He took a piece of canvas, damp and clean, and wiped the edges to prevent fingers from becoming greedy. "It's left for those who work." "I'm working on waking up," Ned growled, running his thumb along the inside edge; the powder stuck like avarice. "You're working on dying," I said, "but you want to have a career."

The crew pulled as if someone had greased our legs. The pump took a rhythmic, dirty beating, the bilge gave way with a hiss, cables were re-bedded, clamps tightened, hoses knotted like lies that must last. The fuse box grumbled in offense, but let us. The boots quietly tapped out the old ritual: short—short—long. Ned deliberately missed the mark by a fraction—not quite counter-clock, just a threat that would soon require a name. Conseil saw it, said nothing, but his chalk scratched harder. He wrote small numbers on the edges of the tablet: 1, 2, 3—like reminders for a judge who tends to forget.

I felt the stuff in my tongue, in the roof of my mouth, all the way down to my neck. It turned anger into warmth and tiredness into hatred. I would have hugged anyone and ripped their teeth out, depending on who opened their mouth first. The room pulled at us, and we pulled back. Air was scarce, but the

gap in it was just big enough to fit a heartbeat into. 3-2-3. We breathed in millimeters, and every millimeter had a price. Ned poured the rest into the cup, acting as if Conseil had forced him to. "Service," he said again, and the word fell to the floor like a rivet.

"Enough," said Nemo, and air pinched even tighter, until even the "enough" was just a hiss. Conseil put down the cup, but didn't immediately pull his hand away. "Sealed," he murmured, and laid the canvas across it, like a cloth over a face. "No more." Ned grinned, as if he'd just been promised something extra. "Later," he whispered to me, and I knew he didn't want to sleep tonight; he wanted to steal numbers. I felt the Nautilus writing all this down in its balance sheet, coldly, thoroughly, without humor.

The man with the red map in his hand asked for water, got it, drank, breathed shallowly, and his gaze said he'd rather talk to the whale than to us today. Another stuck his nose in the cup like a rat sniffing church soup. "Hands off," Conseil said sharply. "We're working." Ned was already standing at the stove again, as if he'd found an invisible door there. "Up air," he murmured, his tone a catch. Nemo didn't lift a finger. "Down work," Ned tested, just to hear how few answers he needed to still be right. "If you're looking for slogans," I said, "look for them in your knees."

"No slogans," Nemo said, "only results." The room stared at him, and his pupils briefly dilated. Just a second. I saw it. Conseil saw it. Ned saw it and smiled as if he'd just been delivered a free pile of wood. "Order," Nemo said again, and the clock hands moved slightly around it. Air/Light/Work, the holy three that tasted like us today.

I picked up the cup again, just to put it down so the trembling would have something to do. And that's when the world played its dirty trick. The powder dust Conseil had tapped onto the canvas—barely visible, a fine rim on the cup's rim—dissolved. Not down. Not where gravity, at rest, does its job. It drifted upward, like a thin mist with a guilty conscience. A fine circle, light, bright, like a cheap halo over a tin wreck. It stood a finger high above the cup in the air, clean, closed, and vibrated—not fast, not slow, simply precisely—in 3-2-3. Short—short—long. I held my breath, Ned laughed softly, Conseil whispered a number, Nemo didn't blink. The ring lasted three beats, then collapsed, soundlessly, as if the air had decided that physics counted again today. We stared at the cup as if it had just fallen from the sky. He was just tin. And we were just people who had forgotten which way was up.

Ned made a school out of boots. No blackboard, just a floor that eats chalk, and men who prefer fists to footsteps. "Stop thinking," he said, "start kicking." He stood in the circle, heels wide, knees weak, his back a threat. Conseil rolled the chalk over his fingers like a piece of brass weighing the truth. "We have grids," he growled, "now time signatures." He drew small dots at the intersections of the lines, tiny white gnats on gray sheet metal. Next to them were signs, not beautiful, but unambiguous: arrows that pointed not out, but in, into our stupid feet. "Here the first kicks," he explained, "here the second, here both together. Short—short—long. Whoever falls, falls on the spot, not next to it. Whoever falls next to it, falls against me."

"Push-pull," Ned smiled, and the smile was a stone in his stomach. "Short—long—short. Quietly, so he won't notice." He meant the boat, or Nemo, or God, depending on who's listening. I stepped next to him because you're supposed to stand next to fuses when you don't have a free hand to punch them out. "You're acting like a conductor," I said. "I'm just the drum," he retorted, "the others are sticks." He stamped: left—pause—right—right. Not loudly. Mean. The chalk under his sole made a shallow "krr" sound, as if it were about to lose its color from shame.

Nemo stood at the plate and did what he always did: nothing visible. His fingers rested a breath above air, his gaze like a screwdriver that had known for an hour exactly which screw was next. "Breathing stays in the basic rhythm," he said. "Those who breathe counter-rhythm have less of both." A murmur. A few looked away, as if he had reached into their pants while they were praying. Air narrowed, millimeters, an administrative act that pulled throats. "You see?" Ned whispered to me. "He hears the feet. So now they carry words." He kicked again, even more softly this time, and I heard it anyway, because bones have ears when anger dwells in them.

Conseil gripped the box with the chalk like a surgeon grips a knife when he knows too much meat will kill him. "Point A, Point B, Point C," he explained, as if we were learning a children's game where the loser has to give up his lung. "One—two—three; two—three—two is forbidden. Heel, ball, ball. No heroic kicks; heroic kicks rip out wedges and hearts." He took the man with the red card instead of a hand—who was still burning but preferred dancing—and gently placed his boot on Point B. "You stay short if he goes long," he said. "You go long if no one says anything." The man nodded, teeth on pain. He kicked, cleanly, and I liked him for the courage no one sees.

The pump didn't need us, but it got us. Two people stood by it, as an alibi in case Nemo asked if we were working or just rehearsing. Bilge kept quiet, but

the floor spoke instead. The chalk dots looked at us like eyes, the little ones you never forget once you've drawn them. Ned walked in a semicircle, spouting sentences that reeked of slogans even though they only had breath. "If I stamp, you don't stamp. If I don't stamp, you stamp. I am the gap. You are the blow." It sounded like bad alcohol that you can suddenly tolerate. Some nodded. One spat. One prayed without reaching his lips when he said "Amen."

"Code it in your heels," I sneered. Ned grinned. "It's been there since the shipyard." He lifted his heel a fraction, dropped it, right next to the dot, not on it. Intentional. Cheeky. The air made*hnn*, that collective sound of throats as Nemo tightens our belts, just a tooth, just enough to make every sentence too short and every rage too long. "Breathe in time," Nemo repeated softly, "otherwise the record will breathe for you." I saw the sliders—air, light, work—the saints. Work remained harsh, light remained yellow, air closed in. Voices became blades. Blades became tongues. Tongues became footsteps.

Conseil drew a second grid to the right of the first, smaller, denser, for those who stumble. "Pace for idiots," he called it almost politely. "If you make it here, you can go over to the real hell." Two swapped, one failed immediately, fell next to the dot, tore a curse into the metal, and put it back in place, because curses cost a toll down here. Conseil reset it. "Heel—ball—both. Again." Ned, invisible to outsiders, laid the counterbeat underneath: left—rest—right—right. The man crawled into the rhythm like a coat that didn't like him. He stayed in it.

"Why push-pull?" I asked, not because I didn't know the answer, but because I wanted to hear what it sounded like down here when even the oxygen was censoring it. "Because order is a cage you have to open from the inside," Ned said too loudly. "Because the cage has air," Nemo said dryly, "and outside there's only water." "Water is more honest," Ned retorted. "Honesty drowns quickly," Nemo concluded. "I can swim," Ned growled. "Not in a vacuum," Conseil said. He was as right as a scar. No one laughed.

The drug crept into our tendons, turning tiredness into offended energy. Boots knocked, not loudly, but rudely. Short—long—short somewhere; short—short—long against it; two systems stalking each other. The ground absorbed everything because ground can remain silent until it bursts. I saw water standing in the chalk marks, tiny, shimmering pools that didn't run down but clung to the lines, as if geometry had gills. The man with the harbor singsong hummed "heave" again, just a breath, then choked on the push-beat of Ned's heel. "Not sing," said Conseil. "Count." "I can't count," the man muttered. "Study," said Conseil, and his tone would have made even an engine obey.

Ned built himself a choir without the men realizing they were one. He walked up to three who were too angry to think and tapped them on the knees. "You on 'short'. You on 'long'. You on 'short' after that." No names, just positions. "If I stamp, you swallow air. If I don't stamp, you spit it out." He practiced it with them, a low stutter of feet that said more than all the fists to come. I should have punched him. I helped him because stupidity is contagious when it has a rhythm. "Switch," I muttered, and we switched, like people who are secretly screwing the priest and realize the priest hasn't believed the sacrament for a while.

Conseil countered with mathematics. He wrote small pairs of numbers on the edge of the plate: +1/−¼, −1/+½, zero/zero. A kind of musical notation for sliders. "When air slides here, work slides there," he explained to no one, because no one wanted to be clever when anger was a discount. Nevertheless, the numbers stuck, like black and white flies on a yellow light. Nemo pointedly ignored them, which means he eats them when no one's looking.

I was trapped between two worlds: in Ned's feet and in Nemo's millimeters. It's a lousy intersection where accidents always happen. My calves burned, my tongue turned into a dry rag that could only lick numbers. 3-2-3 in my head, 2-3-2 in my stomach. I stepped cleanly, I stepped wrong, I didn't step at all, just to hear if the wall would respond again. It didn't. Today it was listening. Eavesdropping is the politest form of threat.

"Pick up the pace," Ned called softly, just for the four of us who heard him. We pulled ahead. The boat responded, of course. Air pinched, work pushed, light cast a shadow over our faces that made us look older than we'd ever become. "See?" Ned snarled, "he's listening." "He only listens where to pinch," I said. "That's how you teach your dogs," he grinned. "Until they open your throat." "Will you open his throat or mine?" "His first." "Coward." "Realist." And we kept pedaling, because down here words are just placeholders, until Stahl speaks again.

Conseil added the final stroke of his little war-shaft: two counter-arrows from the grid to the plate. "This," he said, "is just training. If you steal the beat today, you won't get it tomorrow." "Tomorrow is a son of a bitch," said Ned. "Tomorrow is the only deity that bills," said Conseil. Nemo said nothing. He turned up the air by an eighth, dropped the work a notch. Carrot and stick, but the sugar factory has been closed for years, so the stick is the only option. It worked anyway. A man who had just fallen out of counter-beat stumbled into the basic beat like he would into a warm hallway.

The drug revealed cracks in their faces. Eyes too large, teeth too white, sweat too fast. I braced my hand against the bulkhead to watch the chalk we smeared under our soles: stars, crumbs, dirty moons. The floor was a calendar of white wounds. I stepped on one and felt nothing. I stepped past one and felt everything. It was as if the ground decided to give you pain only when you sought it out. "Ned's choir," I said. "Our apocalypse," Conseil said.

"Again," Ned commanded, and his vocal cords were a drum. Short—long—short. The three he had trained answered. Short—short—long. Two systems ran parallel, rubbing without bumping. That's harder than beating. Anyone can beat. Coexistence is an art. "On the third blow, you take air," Ned whispered. "On the fifth, you give it back." "How many fingers does a dead god have?" I asked. "More than you." "Wait." I raised my hand. It trembled, not from the powder, but from the knowledge that somewhere tonight, an airlock door was turning into a dream. "Later," Ned said. "Later is our stage." "Later is Nemo's lungs." "Yet."

And then the embarrassing magic happened, which I now hate, because it always shows us that we are extras in the theater of tin. We stood close together, our boots just above the chalk dots, as if they were electrical outlets. No one set foot. No one moved a thing out of breath and out of sight. And yet, a dot jumped. Not much. A tiny white, mosquito-like ass of chalk lifted itself—"jumped" is the wrong word, "moved" is more accurate—around another corner of the grid. From A to B, exactly one grid width, cleanly, still, as if an invisible heel had nudged it. Then the next dot—*click*– in the eye, not the ear, also jumped. Exactly in the counter-beat, which Ned was currently holding in his ankles: short—long—short. No shoe on, no wind, no trembling from the hull. Just chalk, which had decided that geometry has an opinion today. Ned held his breath, Conseil wrote "seen" behind his eye, I kept my curse. And Nemo? He didn't look. But I know he felt it in his millimeters, because the air suddenly tasted as if it had a secret it was only going to tell us later.

The fuse box was still open like a mouth devouring a bad mood, and the room vibrated at that speed that makes you think faster and therefore act more stupidly. The powder gleam lay in his pupils like a second lamp. The man nicknamed "Church" because he used to ring mass on land had reached too deep into his cup. His hands were like hummingbirds with knives on them. "More light," he wheezed, "I want to see the truth." Down here, truth is a joke without a punchline, but he stomped over to the box anyway, trembling, determined, like someone who can no longer distinguish between courage and brain-compulsion.

"Hands off," Conseil said, not loudly, just sharply enough to give the word a rough edge. Kirche grinned, trembled, and lifted the switch from the secondary strand, which looked like a bungee jumper without a rope. "Just a little," he murmured, "just a little sun for your belly." Ned stood beside him, his pupils as black as harbor ponds, and had that look that said: Leave him alone, maybe we'll find heaven faster this way. I grabbed Kirche by the shoulder, felt his muscle rattle like a poorly installed railing. "Light eats air," I growled. "Then it'll eat you first," he gasped, tore, and the copper responded with an offended*zzrrp*.

The box spewed sparks, not large, but furious. A smell of ozone and damp dust filled the air, and all tongues were suddenly afraid, knowing how well they conduct electricity. "Back!" barked Conseil, yanking the rubber mat forward, shoving Kirche onto it with his knee as if he were shoving a dog off a table. "Canvas!" he continued to yell, and someone handed him the wet rag, which smelled of rubbing alcohol like a hospital where people drink. He wrapped the canvas around the clamps, carefully, quickly, a suture that ties off death.

Nemo stood at the plate and raised two fingers, no more.*hnn*The room suddenly coughed, and all sentences stuttered. "Turn the lights down," said Nemo, his voice like tin. The box didn't listen to him—but we did. Words became as expensive as fresh tobacco in prison. Kirche trembled, wanted another, raised his arm again, and I saw the sweat vibrating on his lower lip in the 3-2-3. "Stay," I snarled, pressing him deeper onto the mat. He bared his teeth, not at me, but at the air. "More light or I won't see the truth." "The truth won't see you either," Ned cried. "It has other things to do."

A thin splinter glowed at the edge of the insulation block, a half-hairline crack of light that pretends to be harmless until it makes a loud noise. Conseil pressed the canvas onto it; it hissed, an offended cat. "Main switch stays closed," he said, "otherwise we'll boil our lungs." Kirche laughed, a high, ugly thing that was about to become a siren. "Just boil," he grinned, "the Nautilus is hungry anyway." He grabbed the side branch again, not the lever, but the clamp, stupid as tiredness. I swatted his hand away, too late; the clamp emitted a spark that danced on its nailhead. A little scream, not a heroic sound. Just a human being.

Ned pushed his body between him and the box, not out of charity, but out of an instinct for theatrics. "Back to the choir," he whispered into Kirche's face, in a voice that only powder nuts obey. Kirche nodded, a wreck of movement, and stomped back, but kept his eyes glued to the box like an addict to a bottle

labeled "medicine." "Later," promised Ned, the liar, and dropped him into the second row, where the drug turns people into flagpoles.

"Insulate the back rail," Conseil panted at me, and I slid the wet canvas under the copper, tightly, until the water in the fabric formed a boundary that electricity respects when it's trying to be polite. The battery hummed, not angrily, just annoyed. The lamp above the box flickered briefly—a Morse code spelled out by the filaments in bad Latin. "Not now," said Nemo, "breath in 3-2-3. Whoever talks loses a syllable of air." It was the meanest thing about him: that he could silence people with millimeters, without needing blood.

A second man, the thin one with the knife scars, suddenly also grabbed for the light—not for truth, for stage presence. The powder in him wrote "I see" on his cornea. "Hands off!" shrieked Conseil, loudly this time, and it was as if the chalk on his tongue broke. The thin man twitched, stopped, his wrists trembling as if someone had placed little birds in his tendons. Ned put his hand on the back of his neck, pressed gently. "Later," he repeated, "we'll get the sun at the lock." A promise made of rust. It held him.

I opened the small side flap we'd temporarily covered yesterday and saw the brown germ lurking under the insulation tape—no mistake, just fatigue looking for a stage. "Water," I said, and the man with the red map handed me the bottle. I dribbled, not much, just enough to make the screen remember why it was there. The smell of warm rubber and spirit turned the room into a port pharmacy where scores are settled with fists. "Yet," said Conseil. "Not," said Nemo. And all our nerves obeyed two imperatives that hate each other.

Kirche pressed his palms to his thighs, breathing shallowly and rapidly—wrong, but serviceable. His forehead was a rain barrel, refusing to overflow. "I can't sit," he groaned. "Then stand still," Conseil cut in. "Count." Kirche counted, and the counting held him together like a belt that has to replace too many meals. "One—two—three," he murmured, toothily, and for the first time since the package, his voice sounded like a person and not a message.

Nemo's fingers still hovered over the air, his gaze half on light, half on nothingness. I hated how still his shoulder remained, while little glitches lurked beneath his skin like dogs licking their snouts. "Ready on the side branch," I shouted. "Not yet," said Conseil. "The screw is singing." I put my ear to the box, heard nothing—then I heard, a fine, dry squeak, like a wasp praying behind sheet metal. "Turn back," he said. I turned, an eighth note, a click, a satisfied sigh of metal. "Now," nodded Conseil. "Now even stupidity can breathe again."

Ned gave me the look you only give when you see how close someone is to falling over. "Everything okay?" he asked without mockery. "Ask the clock," I said, only then realizing how tightly my hands were gripping the box as if it were a railing at the top of a flight of stairs. The chronometer was ticking normally, the liar. No caper, no jump, clean time for dirty people. I wanted to beat her.

"Close," said Nemo. "Not yet," said Conseil again – and then my eyes performed that little betrayal they've been practicing lately: They lingered somewhere else. On the chip. The blob of glowing residue on the insulation block – no longer a spark, more a glow – moved. Not forward, not out. Backward. Cleanly. Quietly. Like a scar that decides to become a wound again and retreats into the skin. He crept into the insulation, a grain of light that knows no direction but "back." The edge closed in on him, tissue lifted, absorbed him, smoothed out, as if nothing had ever burned there. No soot, no blister. Just a smooth, clean lie that stayed warm without glowing.

"Seen it?" I whispered. "Seen it," Conseil breathed. Ned grinned as if the boat had just winked at him. Kirche held his breath, not out of respect—out of fear that the chip would land in his throat. Nemo didn't blink. But his fingers lifted a breath, as if the record had secretly tapped his knuckles. The lamp above us flickered once, a short, guilty snap, then everything was back to yellow dish.

Ned made politics out of breath. No platform, no banner—just throats that are too little air, and precisely for that reason are ready to believe any sentence that makes them feel like it's oxygen. He stood at the grid like a conductor on a waterlogged raft. "Up air!" he roared, as if that were salvation in itself. Two, three, five men answered in unison, hoarsely, greedily: "Down work!" Their voices were blunt knives, but they cut nonetheless. Conseil raised his hand as if holding a baton of chalk and counted over it: "Three—two—three!" His numbers clanged against Ned's slogan like nails against tin.

"No one screams without kicking," Conseil snarled. "Throat costs air." Ned grinned, his pupils still too wide from the pharmacy. "Exactly," he said, "so I scream."*for*you, and you step*for*me." He stamped in counter-beat, quietly, meanly: short—long—short. Three boots took it as if they'd been waiting for someone to finally allow them to be wrong. The chalk marks under the soles acted like circuit diagrams for betrayal. I stepped off the mark, right on the base beat, just to show the boat that not everyone here is deaf with rage.

Nemo stood at the plate, his fingers not on it, just above it, two millimeters of mercy in steel. He didn't have to shout; millimeters are king down here.

"Breathe in time," he said. "He who shouts pays in thin air." Ned laughed and let the slogan sink in: "Up with the wind! Down with the work!"—no longer shouted, but dripping into the bones, so that even the men who hate him join in without noticing. A voice from the crowd—that thin bastard with the knife scars—became Ned's megaphone: "Up with the wind!" He bared teeth like coins of counterfeit silver. Two others answered, promptly, obediently. "Down with the work!"

Conseil responded with math. He drew a second line of chalk diagonally across the grid and wrote "Cut." "This is where you separate anger from work," he growled. "If you do both at the same time, you'll die faster." No one laughed. The screw-believer with the red map hand raised his boots and neatly stepped on "Cut." Strong. Wrong. Ned's grin said: Good student. I would have liked to ram the chalk into his brain, just to get some peace and quiet.

"Demonstration," said Nemo, and his tone was colder than the glass. He brushed the air a quarter*on*The whole crew made this collective "hnn"—a thank you drink that no one can afford. Before anyone could say "Hurrah," he dropped work by half an hour.*up*Knees grew heavy, arms turned to lead with teeth. "This is what freedom feels like when it calculates," he said, and I loathed him for saying it, because it was true. "Upward thrust!" Ned barked immediately, reflexively, hungrily. "Downward labor!" roared the chorus behind him, a touch too late, but loud enough to sound like a decision. Nemo wasn't looking, and that was precisely how he saw everything. The plate remained in its new, ugly balance, like a scale that had been deliberately miscalibrated.

"Knees on the beat!" Conseil shouted. He walked down the line, clapping his shoulder blades, and giving breath with his hand:*paf—paf—paaaf*I went with him, not because I belong to him, but because counting is the only thing down here that still resembles marriage—a contract you sign against yourself. Ned crept into our ears, "Air up—work down," over and over again, like a cheap litany with a discount card. Three men immediately became his church. They echoed his words so obediently that I knew they'd be the first to put their fingers on the lever later at the lock.

“No one touches the plate,” warned Conseil, “if I*1*say, breathe her*short—short—long*, if I*2*say, you spit out air in a long stroke." "I say*3*', growled Ned, 'and at the*3*You pull the leash on the truth." "Truth has no neck down here," I said, "only teeth." "Then we'll rip it out," he grinned. His boots thumped in reverse, and the chalk beneath them sounded as if it were laughing.

The fuse box muttered angrily behind us, the battery purred, and the lamp hung in its yellow court, listing every wrinkle on his face as a guilty entry. Borel didn't snore; dead people don't snore. But that damned coin inside the glass seemed to have slipped higher, a finger's breadth, without anyone having lifted it. I looked away so I wouldn't have to think about it, especially when there are already too many trains running.

Ned continued the escalation. “On*A*you scream*Air high*, on*B*you scream*Work down*. I'll stamp the beat into your bones." He pointed with his boot:*A*—short, left;*B*—short, right; then*both*, long, as if it were the holy blow. The thin knife neck thundered "Breathe up!"*A*, the two next to him shouted “Get the work down!”*B*It worked because it was simple, and because simple things always move faster than common sense. Conseil gritted his teeth and looked at Nemo. Nemo did what he does best: not blink.

“Again!” Ned.*A!*—“Breathe up!”—*B!*—"Work down!"—Long!—Boots that sound better in the wrong rhythm than in the right one. I noticed the Nautilus beneath us flattening its ears. Millimeters. Always those damned millimeters. Air took a hit.*narrower*,*without*that Nemo's fingers had touched the slider. Or perhaps he had nodded, so little that only metal would notice. The men rasped the rest of the password. Number beat word, but word came back.

“Get away from the record,” I whispered to Ned. “I’m going*your turn*he whispered back. "If he never listens to us, what are we here for?" "Because no one's waiting for us up above," I snarled. "Yes, there is." "Who is?" "The whale." That was either a joke or religion. Down here, the difference is as small as a screw head.

Conseil performed countermagic. He took chalk and glued new throats to our soles: arrows from the points*away*, not go. "If he*A*screams,” he said, “you swallow*B*down. If he*B*yells, you still your heels." "Sabotage," grinned Ned. "Protection," corrected Conseil. "Leave them something to breathe, boy." "I'm only taking what's mine," spat Ned. "You don't own anything," I interjected, simultaneously feeling how much I was lying.

The choir grew. Three became five, five became seven. Slogans achieved what only bloody knives can: unity. The crew teetered into a shared stupidity that warmed me up. I felt it taking me along, even though I hate it. "Upward thrust!"—"Downward thrust!"—*A!*—*B!*—Lang. The record made*hnn*,*krr*,*mm*. I heard it in my jaw. The boat was annoyed. Annoyed things become dangerous.

Nemo let us walk right up to the edge where men want to turn into angels because they believe wings save air. Then he made his little joke: He let the plate*himself*jump. No hand, no finger. Work was about a*half*high, air fell by a*Quarter*A neat, sadistic hop in the machine. Knees slammed against mathematics, throats spat out words like pebbles. "Now," Nemo said quietly, "count." Conseil counted. Ned stumbled.*not*Holy bastards, he didn't stumble. He took the plunge, laughed, and made the call deeper, dirtier. "Air up," he panted, "Work down," half of Hell answered.

“Stop,” Conseil demanded, “otherwise the rhythm will peel your skin off.” No one finished. Slogans are cheaper than painkillers and warm your hands. The man with the red map instead of a hand raised his fist—not against Nemo, but against the trembling. “Breathe up!” he shouted, and I saw how*high*the eyes softened. The chorus answered, "Work down!"—and the boat, the lousy, adaptive beast, dropped the work*a touch*sink, just enough to make you think you've won, and just enough to make you come begging again tomorrow.

I looked at Conseil. He looked at Nemo. Nemo stared into the void and pretended it was a mirror. "One more round," said Ned, quieter now, sweeter, as if he wanted to take the men by the hand. And they went along, because down here, sweetness is rarer than God. "Air up."—"Work down."—*A.*—*B.*—Long. The floor vibrated, giving itself courage. The fuse box was silent out of boredom. The battery purred like a cat that knows it has poison in its saliva.

Then there was silence, the kind of silence reminiscent of spoilers: you know something's about to happen, and you'll hate it, even if you love it. We gave another rallying cry. "Upward air!"—"Downward work!" And the room gave back something no wall should. No echo soup, no pipe spitting. An answer—dry, tinny, without a mouth, without a man.*Two—three—two.*Not loud. But accurate. So accurate that the skin under my nails prickled. We reflexively called*short—short—long*—the voice from the tin answered*short—long—short*. Push-pull, clean, mocking, as if the Nautilus had finished telling us its story and was now correcting it with footnotes.

The men held their breath, as if they had suddenly been educated. Ned grinned, teeth too broad. Conseil held out his hand as if for a nasty rain. Nemo did nothing. Nothing at all. And that was precisely the worst part, because the boat jumped into the gap left by his silence. Once again, the wall answered, clear, sober, without music:*Two—three—two.*I pressed my fingers against the bulkhead. Cold. Dry. And yet my ear vibrated as if someone had tapped my eardrums from within. The metal had given us back a password. One that didn't belong to us.

The choir was just eating away at its bones, "Air up—work down" like a stomach that's never satisfied, when the tiny, dirty miracle happened, the kind you only recognize when you've seen too much. Nemo stood at the slab as always—priest with three brass wafers—and for a moment became nobody. Not a captain, not a judge, not a damned preacher. He was simply gone. No movement, not a wrinkle, not a pupil with a knife in it. A blank stare, so clean you almost want to polish it. For a single breath, his forehead searched for the word "order" and found only dust.

The record noticed it first. Not loudly—a breath in the hands: air twitched, work held its breath, light pretended to be innocent. 3-2-3 stumbled, not to 2-3-2, more to a "nothing at all," as when a musician needs the string he's just broken. I felt the room bend its knees, as if it were about to jump. Ned saw it, of course he saw it—his grin narrowed like a razor blade. "See?" he breathed. "The Pope has a broken cable." Conseil interrupted with his voice, chalk still in his hand: "Count!" The counting slammed into the silence Nemo had left behind like nails on tin: "One—two—three. One—two—three."

The crew swayed, but no one fell. The boat held. Or the boat held us—I don't know which is worse. The screw-believer with the red map for a hand pressed his lips together and stepped on point B, cleanly, almost tenderly, as if you could calm metal if you handled it properly. The thin knife-neck barked reflexively, "Get the work down!", received no answer, and only then realized how expensive air suddenly was again. Air tightened its teeth—not a finger had touched the plate. Millimeters of mind. Millimeters of force.

"Nemo," I said, not out loud, just so my tongue would believe it. No answer. His pupils were two small windows into a room without light. I hated him. I hated him because he measured us in millimeters, and in that one second, he wasn't even millimeters anymore. Ned put his heel into push-pull, quietly, meanly, just to test if the machine could taste the absence of a god. It did. The boat tensed its belly, 3-2-3 came back, first like a lie, then like a law. The men breathed in straight gasps again. Slogans fell from their mouths like worn nails. "Air..."—nothing. "Work..."—nothing either. We counted. Numbers are the last religion that still delivers.

Conseil stood close to Nemo's shoulder, closer than one should be to a man who educates people by the millimeter. "Plate holds," he murmured in his ear, as if Nemo were the patient and the machine the doctor. No reaction. I raised my gaze to the glass—reflex, cowardice, thirsty eyes. The chalk rings vibrated, the scratch marks stood still like seams in wet leather. Borel lay under the

sheet and was the only one who didn't care about the blackout. The coin was stuck inside, cheeky, and I swore it was waiting.

"Order," came from Nemo's mouth, without a voice, only as a form. His fingers lifted a breath—no click, no crack, just that well-oiled arrogance with which one can think of as a swindler when one has played God long enough. Air gave us back a millimeter, work took a millimeter, light remained in its yellow court that registers every pause as guilt. "Go on," said Nemo. It sounded as if the Nautilus had said the word first and he had merely repeated it.

Opportunity crept into Ned's eyes. He turned his head, searching for faces soft enough to tip over now. He found them. Two by the grid, one by the pump, one by the box, which was "church" because bells live in it. "Did you see?" Ned whispered into the dust. "He's not always there. When we breathe, when/stomp—" "If you keep talking," I growled, "you won't hear it coming when Wedge counts your teeth." "Keil only sings when you ask him to," he grinned. "I pray differently."

Conseil tore at the chalk as if it were a safety device and drew a line between the plate and the grid that looked like a leash. "Here," he said, "is the dividing line. This far, you can go with slogans. Beyond that, only numbers." "Numbers eat courage," Ned pointed out. "Numbers eat stupidity," Conseil corrected. "Courage dies of an overdose." The drug was in our pupils, speaking hurt because every syllable cost a millimeter of air. So we stamped. Short—short—long. Whispering in push-pull, like a mouse in a church.

The fuse box murmured, offended but obedient. The battery purred, warm, full, ready to hate again if someone asked it to. I heard the pump in the next room complaining like an old belly. The bilge remained silent, mere water with a bad temper. The back outside stayed away, as if waiting for us to imagine an opening in our own skin. Everything was quieter, and precisely for that reason, more dangerous. Silence is the curtain behind which knives wait.

"He was gone," one said, without looking. "Shut up," another said. Silence and greed are cousins down here. Ned sprinkled a final "breathe up" into the cracks, more of a test than a command. No response. The men had understood: If the boat loses its priest for a moment, it's better to be an altar boy than a rebel until the incense hangs again.

I needed something that didn't lie. I needed time. The chronometer ticked. Clean, cowardly, correct. I hate correct things. They act as if they weren't part of us. I didn't lift it—I just looked, the way you look at the face of a dog that

doesn't want to bite.*should*Second hand: clack—clack—clack. Nemo was breathing like a human being again; you could see his neck tendon attracting words he'd later utter. Conseil counted more quietly, but he counted. Ned stamped the push-pull into my pores, short—long—short, like a tattoo stolen from a dead man.

And then time played its little, naughty trick. No drama, no jump to zero this time, no solemn theater. The second hand didn't take the next marker. Not hesitating. Not trembling. It*skipped*her. A single second, swallowed cleanly, as if we'd never possessed it. Click————clack. I blinked, double, like someone who thinks he's misread something. Ned saw it too; his pupils constricted briefly, then widened again, as if he were replacing the missed second with drugged-up faith. "Did you—" I began. "No," Conseil cut in, "keep counting." He'd seen it. He refused to possess it.

"Order," repeated Nemo, and I heard a small groove in the word, as if his tongue had briefly touched sand. Air remained, work remained, light remained. Everything "remained," and that's why I believed it less. Space acted as if nothing had happened. People love that. Boats, too.

Kirche suddenly giggled, not in a friendly way. I turned around. He wasn't staring at the box, not at the record—at the glass. "Look," he whispered. I hate that word. It turns men into children. But I looked. Condensation at the edge of the center target, right next to Conseil's scratch-furrowed staff lines, pooled, not much, a drop that didn't want to be one. It grew. It decided. And then it did what it shouldn't: It didn't fall. It didn't run down either. It stayed. Horizontal. A small, clear pearl, fixed like a fake smile, just above the center, exactly where you'd rest a finger if you were foolish enough to touch inside. For three heartbeats it vibrated—3-2-3—and stopped, as if someone had taken the missed second out of the clock and pinned it to the wall as a drop of water.

"Holy shit," breathed the knife-neck, and the sentence sounded like rubber tearing. Ned grinned guiltily. Conseil raised the chalk, let it fall. Nemo didn't look. I swear he didn't look. And I also swear he knew it anyway, because the slab grew quieter at that very breath, like a dog briefly pinning its ears back when its master murmurs the name of an enemy in his sleep.

“Onward,” Nemo said at the end, and you could hear that he was back. His voice was metal again, not hole. We counted. We kicked. We acted as if no one had swallowed time and as if not a single drop stood on the shoulder of physics, unable to fall. The drop remained. The clock acted as if it had never been wrong. And somewhere inside us, the thought that no one wants to

express aloud took hold: Maybe the boat will hold us—not because*he*commands. But because*it*now knows how it works.

Ned didn't choose the lever with his hands—first, he chose it with his eyes. Three times, his pupil slid over the air slide on the panel, as if weighing a knife he'd already decided to use. He stood not in front of the desk, but just beside it, where the shadows begin to paint courage greater than it is. His two chosen ones—the knife-necked man and the screw-believer with the red map for a hand—discreetly left the circle. No command word, just the old port sign language: chin left, chin right, once, tongue against the incisors. The password ran quietly, like contraband, beneath the ribs. "A."—short step. "B."—short step. Then "long," but silently. I heard the pounding under the men's skin, push-pull in their knees like a blade in a sock.

Conseil saw it, of course. He always saw everything there is to hate. He tucked the chalk behind his ear, ripped the belt from his hip—not the one for the bandage, the other one, his stupid, honest belt—and started walking like he was leashing a dog that had never learned to sit. “Stay off the lever,” he said without teeth. Ned smiled, with teeth: “I’m not touching anything. I’m just breathing louder.” His two built him a windshield, like on the dock before a drinking brawl: shoulders broad, elbows loose, hands empty so no one can say they started it. I was already on my way, my stomach a rusty bucket rattling with dignity. The room sensed the direction like an animal in a storm.

The plate pretended to be deaf. A hand of air where Nemo wanted him to be loved; work as firm as an oath; light in the yellow judgment. And yet I smelled anticipation in the brass—the way cables sometimes smell of thunderstorms when no one touches the switch. Nemo just stood there. Not a finger on metal. There was that clean impudence on his face that says: Try it. One of the men behind me—church, of course—whispered "now," as if it were a bell in a city that no longer exists.

Ned took the first step not with his foot, but with his leap. "Air up—" barely above a whisper—and the reply, "Work down," crawled from two mouths that wanted to be his. He stepped forward, halfway, then another half, then stood close enough that his breath could have told the pusher who was now master. The knife-neck raised a hand, not much, two fingers—test, theater, temptation. I grabbed his wrist, felt his pulse like nails in wood. "Don't," I said. He grinned. "I just want to know what it feels like to be God." "God stinks," I growled. "Of brass and men."

Conseil was there, faster than our anger: the strap once around the vertical strut of the console housing, then around the crossbar protecting the air damper—a dirty but honest bolt. The knot was ugly, just the way reliable knots look. "Numbers up to here," he said, pulling the leather scar taut. "Behind that, your theater." Ned laughed as if someone had pointed a knife at him. "I'm standing*before*Numbers, dude. The leverage is just a word." "Words suffocate first," said Conseil. "Let them live."

Nemo glanced at him with a look that needed no sharpness. He didn't even lift his neck. And precisely in this polite nastiness lay his power: millimeters on the plate without a hand. I swear I didn't see a finger, and yet I felt air get a touch tighter, work become exactly a grain of sand harder. The boat listened to him from behind. Ned sucked in the throttle like an invitation. "See?" he whispered. "He responds to language. Then we understand each other." "He only understands how to keep you small," I hissed.

Messerhals made a second attempt, quick as a theft: edge of hand under Conseil's belt, lever "just tap." I was there, he was there, Conseil was there – three hands on a lie. The leather creaked. The slider growled, softly, insulted. The battery hummed lower, as if announcing punishment. Nemo remained stone. The room tipped on its tiptoes. A half-step in the floor. The lamp bulb hummed. "Back," said Conseil, placing his forehead against Messerhals's, not as a gesture, just so the man would remind his bones of someone else's will. "Or you'll get your breath from me, not him."

The screw-believer with the red map threw his heavier hand onto the leather as if plucking a cabin boy from the railing. "No heroism," he croaked. "Heroes don't die more beautifully, only more." Ned grinned wider. "He's holding me. See? The record wants me. Giving in is consent." "Giving in is saving energy," Conseil parried. I heard myself laugh, so dry that even the glass rolled its eyes. Behind us, the fuse box ground its teeth, a metallic chewing without hunger.

Then things got messy. The neck of the knife yanked on my wrist, I jerked back, and we slammed against the edge of the desk, which signed my hip as a souvenir. Ned took advantage of the jerk, thrusting his shoulder into the space between the strap and the brace. Conseil ducked, twisted, and put the strap in the crook of his elbow. Not a great grip—but it held. "Pay!" he snarled. "Pay fucks me," Ned spat. "Then marry her," I retorted, "no one does it secretly like that anymore."

The plate still acted as if none of it concerned it. And then – in time, in the accursed 3-2-3 – the three sliders twitched. Not much. Not "jumping." A three-

fingered whisper, which steel can only do when it wants to start thinking. Air down a breath, work without witnesses up a breath, light remained, only the edge of the glass vibrated. The movement wasn't long enough for a scandal and long enough for me to know: we no longer had any choice. The boat was rehearsing how to twitch us. I heard Ned laughing softly. He loves power, no matter where it resides.

"Go away," I said. "Make me," he said. We were children lying to brass. Behind us, the chorus reflexively stamped for courage that isn't any. "Up air!—Down work!"—half-quietly, half-madly, as if praying into a pillow. Nemo didn't look at anyone who wasn't flat. His fingers hovered over the slider as if magnetically offended. "Brace yourself," Conseil growled at the strap and tied the second knot. He pulled it with two quick tugs, one known only to dockworkers and butchers: double through, once back, flat. The knot closed. Messerhals cursed and tested: nothing. Leather says "no" more beautifully than people.

Ned grabbed my right hand, pressed my fingers to his ribs, and grinned into my face, so close that I could taste his powder. "You want to too," he whispered, "you just want to lie more cleverly." "I want to breathe tomorrow at noon," I said. "Then turn it on today," he said. "Otherwise, you'll turn*you*Wake up." Our foreheads touched briefly, a spark without light. The boat listened.

Then there was a small crack—not electric, just human: Conseil slapped Messerhals in the nose, a short, unsentimental smack. Blood, a clean drop, faithful as a dog finding your knee. Ned jumped, I jumped with him, and the entire sculpture of arms, leather, and brass began to shift. I expected the tear in the strap. It didn't come. Instead, it did something leather shouldn't: It tightened. I felt it under my hand. Not from Conseil. Not from me. Not from Ned. The knot breathed. It tightened by half a beat, audibly—*krrp*– like a toothed rope falling in love with its own flesh. The second knot followed suit, a smack of dry leather. The leather suddenly tightened around the brace and guard, as if a third hand had whispered "Stop!"

"Spotted," Conseil said, sounding so calm it chilled me. Ned froze, then grinned even wider, as if the boat had offered him a secret brotherhood. "He's helping you," he mocked. "He's helping the lever," I corrected. Nemo didn't blink, but his larynx swallowed once, dry as chalk. "Back in the circle," he said. Not a commanding tone. A statement the room had already signed off on.

Knife-Neck wiped blood from his upper lip and stared at the knot as if he'd just caught the priest fumbling. Screw-Believer grabbed him away from the strap, carefully, so the strap wouldn't notice we suddenly owed it respect. Ned took a

step back, just to get a running start for later. "I learn quickly," he muttered into the record. "I learn faster," said Conseil, tucking the chalk back behind his ear and tying the free end of the strap—superfluous, but reassuring—in a useless bow. A pretty, pointless bit of order in a world that would rather have us than noise.

I breathed, counted, noticed how air became a touch more generous—not from grace, from tiredness. The plate purred 3-2-3 as if it had never flinched. The strap hung taut, knots content as two pigs after a watering bucket. Ned smiled, a smile of remembrance. "Today he taught us 'no,'" he said. "Tomorrow I'll teach him 'please.'" "And the day after tomorrow 'up,'" added Knife-Neck, his nose stuffed. Conseil looked at us as if he would sort us out later. Nemo stared at the plate like a mirror in which you hope to die young.

And at the very end, when everyone pretended they hadn't seen it, the knots performed their naughty little trick once more. No one was there, no finger, no pull. The leather sighed softly –*krrp*– and both knots tightened themselves by half a turn, just enough that the air lever was now truly a prison. Ned raised two fingers in salute. Conseil didn't write anything down. I felt my spine go cold. And the record continued to hum, cursing, as if self-binding were just another millimeter-by-millimeter order in its holy book.

The cans were empty, the pupils not yet. Eyes too big for the skulls, voices too fast for the tongues. The room vibrated in aftershocks like after a boxing match where neither had won. Conseil added the remains of the first-aid kit, stuffing gauze and needles into the gap, as if the pharmacy could be buried again. Nemo stood by the plate, unmoving, his fingers not on it, just over it, as if waiting for the boat itself to speak the next word. "Ration = zero," he said, so quietly it sounded like a parking ticket. "No refills." His voice had no echo. It didn't need one. Air immediately pinched tighter, work stayed high, light grinned yellow. Punishment in millimeters.

Ned raised his hands as if they were empty—which was a lie. "Ration zero," he repeated mockingly, "but hunger remains. And hunger finds its way." He laughed, a thin line of powder and defiance. Two men laughed with him, reflexively, because they didn't know if they would be allowed to breathe otherwise. "We'll get it at the lock," Ned whispered, "there's more than garbage down there. There are answers down there." Conseil snorted, took the chalk, and wrote in large letters on the bulkhead: "ZERO." The letters were crooked, angry, but legible. "This is it," he said. "Everything until the next lie." Ned grinned wider: "And the next lie is already stuck to the glass."

I turned. Coin. It was still hanging there, inside, just above Conseil's targets, cheeky, impossible. And then—as Nemo repeated "order," more tiredly this time—it did its trick. Not a drop, not a jerk. A slow quarter turn, audible as a click of the tongue. Metal against glass, dry, sure. The plate reversed in the same breath—not far, just a beat, a single, irreverent 2-3-2 in the middle of the beat. And just then, the lamp smoke rising from the hot screen drew a neat loop in the air, tremulous but clear: 3-2-3. Two systems, simultaneously, contradictory, impudent. Air pinched us almost faint, work pressed our legs lower, and yet everyone stood there petrified, because we knew: The boat is winking at us. And it's not winking at Nemo. It's winking at Ned.

Mutiny in the Deep

It began without a drum, just with that dry hum in the belly of the boat that tells you: Today the machine won't eat screws, today it'll eat people. Ozone still hung in your hair from yesterday's electrical game, the screen smelled of pharmacy and guilt, spirit in the towels turned the air into a bar where no one talks anymore. The lamp was back in the yellow courtroom that always finds you guilty, whether you breathe or think. The battery was warm like a bad-tempered cat; the fuse box grumbled softly. The wedge creaked as if trying to calm itself. Glass: chalk rings, scratch furrows, the coin inside like a bad prayer that never ends. The record played its holy 3-2-3, but you could hear it: it only stayed in time because it knew someone was about to break out.

Ned made a plan out of the blue. No note, no long speech—just knuckles, glances, the old port language you use to tell a man "right away" without him moving his lips. He stood diagonally to the slab, where the shadow is longer than the truth. His hands at pocket level, empty, of course empty, so the world would believe he could pull the world's teeth without tools. Knifeneck detached himself from the circle like a scale from a wound. The screw-believer with the red map for a hand stood half a step behind Ned, not as a bodyguard—as an echo. Church, the light-addict on two legs, was already keeping her eyes where the flickering was. Two undecided people stayed at the grid, pretending they had to practice heel, ball, ball. We all knew what was coming and pretended we didn't.

Conseil took the chalk and drew a line on the floor, a long, straight, rude one. He placed it between the slab and us like a leash that only reason sees. "Word up to here," he said, "number after that." The chalk scratched, a dry "krr" that

the room understood. He wrote "breath" on our side and "work" on his. Then he marked a second line, across, as if he wanted to turn the belly of the Nautilus into a chessboard on which all the pieces were equally ugly. "Whoever crosses it, count to three first," he muttered. "Whoever can't, keeps quiet." His voice was a knife without a handle. You can use it, but it'll never be yours.

"Order," said Nemo. The word was small, but it had teeth. He stood at the slab without theater, two fingers a knife-tip over air, a third over work, ignoring light because the yellow court never rules in our favor. Air tightened half a tooth, just enough so the room stopped wasting words. Work rose a grain of sand; knees became more honest. The men collectively made that "hnn" sound you only make when someone shows you that millimeters can also be used as a whip. Ned grinned narrowly, as if the music had been diminished and the stage enlarged.

"Choir ready," he whispered, barely breathing between the letters, and his three reliable idiots were there at once: Knifeneck with the burn in his lip, Church with the sun in his skull, Screwbeliever with duty on his palm. "A," Ned whispered. Knifeneck nodded. "B." Church nodded. "Long." Screwbeliever raised his chin, the kind of "yes" you only expect from men who know how to get skinned by a wire and still laugh afterward. They moved into cover, not to the plate, not yet—just where the shadow inflates courage until it looks like a decision.

I deliberately placed myself between Ned and the line, not as a hero, but as resistance, something one doesn't like to step on because it creaks. "No one dies heroically today," I said. "Today everyone stays ugly." Ned grinned. "Ugly is my job." "Your job is stupidity," I retorted. "Stupidity is paid," he spat, "order isn't." He was right, in the worst way.

Conseil ripped the belt from his waist, the honest belt that had tamed the air lever yesterday, and placed it dryly around the steel strut on the desk: once around, flat back, loop small, knot dirty, reliable. "I won't tie a second knot unless someone tries," he said at a volume that the room understood as a limit. "First warning." He took the canvas, laid it in front of the panel like a little rubber church for boots, so no one could later say his death was sucked onto an electrician. "Second warning." Then he tapped the chalk twice on the protective edge of the air slide: tock—tock. "Third warning." The chalk left a white prayer behind.

Nemo didn't blink. His neck moved so little that I would have considered the movement a lie, if the plate hadn't simultaneously done what his spine wanted:

air remained scarce, work remained difficult, light remained judgment. "Don't scream," he said. "Count." It wasn't an order. It was a diagnosis. He turned nothing and had turned everything. I hated him for it. I was grateful for it. I wanted to rip his tongue out. I wanted him to breathe until we forgot.

"Breathe on me," whispered Ned, and the chorus answered without opening their mouths: heels tensed, knees wobbled, shoulders sought space. The floor absorbed it like an account that bears no interest. I felt the counter-beat in the wood, short—long—short, not loud, just nasty. Conseil saw it, of course, and chalked two little crosses on the grid corner next to Ned's feet, as if to say, "This is where the trouble started." Then he wrote the number 3 over the line. "Only at three," he growled. "Only at three does one cross the line." Messerhals was already counting like a thief: one—two—...

Kirche offered his ray of hope. "More light," he breathed, not loudly, just stupidly. Nemo let the lampshade hang a touch lower, as if to show him who the sun was. "Truth needs shadow," he said. "Truth needs air," Ned countered. "Truth doesn't need either of you," I said, sounding as if I'd spit out water.

The crew took cover, not quickly, but decisively. Two to the pump (alibi), one to the bulkhead (back listening), three to the edge of the grid, where the chalk dots look like stars no one deserves. The man with the red map raised his burned stump as if it were a flag. "Tell me when," he murmured. Ned nodded. Nemo remained silent. Conseil crunched chalk between his teeth and tongue, a quiet, white "let it go."

And then the room became a beat. Not the record—the room. There was a collective "now—right now—almost" that crept from the backs of my knees. Messerhals raised his shoe, half, only half, as if threatening the line, not it. Kirche put his foot forward, an idea, just an idea. The screw-believer exhaled the throttle and made way with his shoulders. Ned stood, hands empty, heart full. His mouth formed a word I didn't hear. Maybe "up." Maybe "mine." Maybe just "you."

Conseil arrived a breath earlier. Not much, just exactly enough. "Two," he said, and his voice turned air into a wall. "Two," I repeated, to give the number weight. Nemo did nothing. Or he did it without hands: air nipped a tooth deeper, work pressed half a millimeter more onto his knees, this bastard remained light. The line on the floor didn't glow; he waited. So did we.

"Three," no one said. "Three," said something in my head that wasn't my voice. Ned made a movement with his chin that you don't forget once you've drunk

with dockers: now. Knife-neck's shoe twitched. Kirche chuckled briefly, that siren act he's taken to ever since the powder stole the patience from his fingers. The screw-believer crunched, "God save me from the living." I raised my hand to take Ned's hand in case it twitched. Conseil raised the strap to strangle Ned's greed in case it barked. Nemo raised nothing. And that was precisely his trick.

The boat listened. I swore I felt the Nautilus put its tongue to its teeth before saying "no." The plate hummed 3-2-3, the battery purred, the box murmured, the wedge creaked, the glass was blind enough for bravery. Slogans wanted to go, "Air up—work down," but they stuck in their throats like fish on false hooks. Everyone waited for the first step, which no one wanted to take until someone did.

It happened in the silence that looks like courage, but is only hunger. No shoe went forward. No foot crossed the line. Only the ground. On the chalk grid, two grid widths in front of Ned's boots, two new prints appeared. Not bold, not loud—clean, white, bold. They lay one grid width in front of the real boots, as if an invisible man had already taken the step we were still negotiating. Left print short, right short, then a longer, barely visible one—counter-tact in chalk, without shoe, without man. I saw it. Ned saw it. Conseil lowered the chalk as if it suddenly had weight. Nemo wasn't looking. But the slab made a tiny "mm" that sounded like a laugh of steel. And we stood there, alive, cowardly, angry—and knew that today the ground had already shown us what our next mistake would look like.

The leap didn't come from the foot; it came from the hands. Messerhals slid under the belt like an eel with bad manners, shoulder first, then elbow, his fingers a lie that "just wanted to feel." The screw-believer took cover, turning his burned palm outward, as if a red map could teach the world. Kirche edged sideways, panting "light" into the yellow court, acting as if air was none of his business. Ned didn't move a meter. He let the others work, the way preachers let others pray. His chin said "now," his knee said "right now," his pupils said "me."

Conseil reacted before his mind was ready. The belt flew over the protective edge, once, twice; he tied the second knot in the leather, not beautiful, not nautical—a hate knot, flat, short, mean. He pulled, tongue between his teeth, and the leather sang that little, obscene krrp when cowhide capitulates and becomes duty. "Up to here," he growled, "and not into stupidity." Knifeneck spat "let go," as if reason had handles. I had his wrist tendons in my fist; they felt like wires laid without a plan. "Take your fingers out of there, or I'll number

them for you," I snarled. "Can you count?" he grinned. "To three," I said. "And on three, you bite your tongue."

Nemo did absolutely nothing. That was his trick. His face was a calm wall. Not a finger on air. Not a finger on work. And yet I heard the record breathing, that disciplined 3-2-3 that makes every sentence shorter than it wants to be. Millimeters obey neck tendons, not hands; we knew that by now. Ned knew it too, and that's why he stayed just outside the evidence area. "Breathe up," he breathed, more into our knees than our ears. Two of his idiots answered from the heel: A! – a kick in the shadow, too quiet to bear guilt, too clear to be innocent.

Kirche giggled, forgot to breathe, tried to touch something on the edge of the lamp, and got a slap in the face from the air, which is what they call a throat slap. "Short—short—long," Conseil counted into his neck, and the numbers became nails tackling his lungs to his ribcage. Knife neck pressed. The slider growled. The belt creaked. My hip hit the edge of the desk, giving myself a new hematoma. The screw-believer pressed his burned arm against Ned's ribs as if to teach him how to stay still when he owes lives. "No heroism," he gasped. "Heroes make leaks."

"Go back into the circle," Conseil said—and retied the knot a third time, this time with that dockworker's cold-blooded routine: over-through-back-flat. No seaman's school. Harbor. Brawl. Burial. The leather wrapped itself around the metal edge like skin around a truth you can't shake. Knifeneck pulled; nothing. The knot grinned without a mouth. Ned tried charm, that wet kind of voice tar: "Listen, tin—we live better when you breathe us." The plate responded with a disdainful purr that knew more about us than we did ourselves.

I smelled spirit from the canvas, the ozone from the box, the old water from the wedge. Everything mingled to create this port pharmacy where morality is served in measuring cups. "Step back," I barked, but didn't step back myself; that's how lies start that work. Messerhals tried again, this time with the flat of his hand, so that he only stroked the brass rim, as if trying to bribe the pusher. The brass rim was made of church: takes your fingers, blesses them with canapés—and still leaves you outside.

Ned smiled thinly. "You're pinching, therefore you're afraid," he said into the record, as if it were a man who could be provoked. Nemo raised his eyes, an idea—the kind of look that puts you back in your chair as a kindergartener. "I'll count," he said. And he counted: "One." Air pinched a breath. "Two." Work pressed a grain of sand heavier. "Three." Light remained Richter. Nothing

spectacular. Just the usual sadism in millimeters. The room made a collective huff and spat out words that were becoming too expensive.

Messerhals lost his sense of humor, which never suited him. "I want to see what God feels like," he snarled, pushing his fingers deeper under the strap, searching for the lever's edge as if he wanted to bite it. "God stinks," I said, "of brass and men's skin." "Then I'll eat him," he spat. "He'll eat back," said the screw-believer, laying his weight on the leather, not brutally, just definitively. The desk took the load, creaking secretly, as if it had teeth that no one cared for.

Conseil was beside me, his forehead against Knifeneck's temple, chalk behind his ear, his eyes full of work. "Breath. In. Three—two—three," he hissed, shoving the count into all of our skulls. The chorus outside in the grid wanted to jump up, deliver slogans, the usual soup of "air up" and "work down." I sliced my hand through the air—silent. Ned grinned, tongue over tooth, and yet let his feet stamp, quietly, meanness in leather: short—long—short. The boat listened. I swear it heard how you listen to the spoon before it hits the tooth.

Then, in that shameless smallness that the boat loves, it happened: the air valve—without hand, without finger, without this human drama—dunked noticeably by a fraction of an inch. Not much. No scandal. A millimeter that costs a lung. I didn't see it first—I felt it; my throat tightened, the remaining sentence "let—" stuck across the roof of my mouth. "Not me," whispered Nemo, without moving. He wasn't lying. That was the real mockery. The boat took the hint that no one else was giving and made us smaller.

Knife-Neck grinned victoriously: "See, he's coming to me." "He's coming to," Conseil growled. "You're just background noise." Ned wasn't laughing anymore; he was storing it. His eyes formed that dark image of power you later claim to have created yourself. Kirche breathed "Light," got no answer, and I was grateful, because answers down here are calculations. The screw-believer pushed his shoulder further against Ned's chest, gently saying "out," as if to a dog you'll never fully train.

"Back," I said. "Make me," hissed Messerhals, and lifted again. I gave him a browbeat, unceremoniously, briefly, a bone kiss against the bridge of his nose. A clean thump. No heroics, just home remedies. Blood came, thin, fast, honest. He recoiled, lashed out blindly, hitting the strap. The leather whimpered, barely audibly, and right then, something happened that I couldn't see, only hear, for the second time that day: The new knot tightened. It took a breath—krrp—as if

it had muscles, and tightened. Not much, just enough so that the slider could no longer be "felt," but disappeared behind a set of animal hide.

"He's tying himself," Conseil said tonelessly. Ned looked at the knot as if he were a priest calling a host by name. "He won't open," he whispered, "well—then we'll beg." "You beg, I'll count," I said. Nemo said nothing. His eyes were briefly holes. No blackout—just absence with style. They came back, clean, cold. "Order," he said. It didn't sound like a command. It sounded like a judgment, already written before we were awake.

Church staggered, holding onto the lampshade, and got a slap half from air and half from reason. "Back!" Conseil barked; I pulled him away by the beam until his knees knew where the ground was. The screw-believer made the final block with his burned arm, like Neymar in a bad version of the port: wide, but without the show. Knife-neck puffed, his nose bled, his ego too. Ned took a step back, raised his hand open, peace-as-tactic. "Nobody wants it today," he said gently. "So we'll want it tomorrow."

I felt the millimeter of air the slider had stolen from us, as if someone were holding a coin in my throat that wouldn't drop. The men behind us—the two undecided ones—had tears in their eyes, not sentimentality: the kind that comes when oxygen demands tax. "Into the circle," Conseil ordered. No shouting. Just decide. The ground obeyed more than the men. We walked, slowly, like men who distrust the shadows behind them. The belt remained taut, the knots untied.

I wanted to convince myself that leather was just leather, and brass was just brass. I wanted to convince myself that I had felt the millimeter wrong. I wanted many things that had no validity down here. The lamp hummed, the battery buzzed, the box murmured, the wedge creaked—everyone spoke normally, so the world lied convincingly enough to continue living.

And then the boat confirmed its insult with an encore so small it hurt: Without a hand, without a pull, without a twitch – the knot went krp again, very quietly, and tightened itself half a beat. The air damper vibrated a fraction, lowered another fraction – an impudent, millimeter-sized "no." I placed my fingers on the strap; it pulsed. Not in time with us. In his own. 3-2-3, messy, proud. Ned smiled as if someone had promised him an altarpiece. Conseil didn't write anything this time. Nemo didn't blink. And the Nautilus held its breath as if it were their property and we were merely tenants with an expiring lease.

Ned broke off like a dog realizing there's more slack in the chain than he thought. He half-turned his back to the plate, tipping toward the lock. "If the priest upstairs stays silent," he grinned, "we'll get confession downstairs." Knife-necked, his nose bloody, grinning through his red. Kirche staggered after him as if propelled by the yellow of the lamp. The screw-believer pulled hard on his burned arm, but he followed anyway, because sometimes duty just means: always where the idiots die. Two undecided people looked at each other, then at the ground, then they too left. The choir shifted—like a current carrying the dirt in the water with it.

Conseil cursed quietly, pulled chalk from his pocket, and wrote a line across the corridor, broad, crooked, threatening. "Up to here." He drew a second line in front of it: "Stop area." His fingers trembled, not from fear, but because counting in the dark costs more than seeing. I followed him; we stood in front of it, like useless barriers made of bone. "Not to the lock," he said. Ned laughed. "Not to the air levers," he retorted. "So where to, my dear? We're supposed to suffocate in a circle?" "We're supposed to count until we know how many of us are left," Conseil growled. "Counting isn't living," Ned spat. "But living without counting is short."

The wedge creaked deep in the boat, a dry, wooden cough that time no longer wants to bear. Batterie growled deeper, offended, as if her dog had been stolen. The record did nothing, remained good, 3-2-3, obedient like a schoolboy secretly copying. Ned stepped close to the lock, rubbed his hand over the rubber mat, damp with condensation, slippery like a tongue. "Here's the door," he said, "the only one that promises us more air." Kirche nodded, feverishly. Messerhals wheezed. "Or less life," said Conseil, and wordlessly he wrote it on the mat in chalk: a cross, crooked, but loud.

I stepped between Ned and the handles. "You open it, and we're all fish food." "Then we'll swim," he grinned. "Your mouth is full of corpses," I said. "They can't hear you anymore anyway." "They always hear," he muttered, and I hated the way he said it. He believed it. The screw-believer stood next to me and just grumbled, "The wedge will hold until it breaks. Don't ask when." Kirche was already lifting the torch from its holder, only to feel the handle as if he were touching the sun. I ripped it from his hand and slammed it against the wall, sending sparks flying. "Anyone else of you touches that thing, and I'll make him the new wedge."

The air became heavy, suddenly, not because Nemo moved the slider—because the boat wanted it to. Millimeters pinched throats, work pressed on legs, knees trembled. Ned just grinned wider. "He hears us. He knows we want

it." "He just knows how to miscalculate you," I snarled. "Then count on me," Ned laughed, and he tore the mat aside a bit.

And that's exactly when it happened: Condensation collected on the bulkhead, just above the lock, nothing special, just the sweat of the steel. But it didn't flow down. It formed a line, thin, clear, then two, then three. The drops joined, forming an arrow. Clean. Clear. It didn't point out, not in. It pointed back—away from the lock, straight ahead, toward the plate. It stayed there for three heartbeats, then scattered like a shattered dream. We all stared. Ned laughed hoarsely. Conseil lowered the chalk. Nemo didn't even look up. But the plate made a mm that sounded like a nod of approval.

The lock suddenly became a stage. Ned stood before it like a priest who'd finally found his altar, his hands empty but his knees full of lies. Knifeneck spat blood into the yellow, grinning because pain has a discount down here. Kirche no longer held the torch—he only held his own trembling. The screw-believer laid his red card of flesh against the rubber, flat, as if he could bless the entire mechanism with it. Conseil drew chalk crosses on the floor, his teeth grinding, the chalk cracking as if it were replacing bone. "Not here," he gasped. "Not now."

Ned didn't yell. He whispered into his men's throats: "Breathe up." And the answer didn't just come from their mouths. It came from their soles. Short—short—long. Push-pull trampled over the chalk lines as if math were a carpet that was finally being burned. Knife-neck sang through his teeth: "Work down." Church giggled like a child who thinks it's swallowed a sun. The screw-believer groaned to the rhythm, a sermon in burnt skin. I wanted to scream, but instead I stepped on Conseil's line as if I could save it with weight.

Nemo stood at the plate, his fingers not moving a millimeter, his eyes like smooth metal. And yet you could hear it: the Nautilus was interfering. A dry bark through the shutters, a growling click from the walls. 3-2-3 rumbled in the ribs. And then—unheard of, impossible—came an answer. No echo, no airplay. Two voices of steel. One in time, good, short—short—long. The other in counter-time, cheeky, short—long—short. Simultaneously. Like two dogs barking at each other, through us.

The men froze. Kirche held his breath as if he had just swallowed guilt. Knifeneck stumbled onto the mat, laughing, blood on his teeth. "He hears us," he gasped. "No," said Conseil, "he's telling us." Ned grinned so broadly his face cracked. "Two voices," he whispered. "One for him, one for me." His hand slid to the lock's edge, gentle, almost loving, as if stroking the throat of an animal

that would soon be his. Nemo said nothing. But the plate vibrated, as if considering who to answer next.

Ned positioned himself just in front of the lock, looking like a king with rusty boots. His fingers glided over the edge, no force, just that gentle probing, which is worse because it plays on tenderness. "Air or lock," he breathed, and the three around him nodded, as if someone had already thrown the dice. Knifeneck held the blood from his nose, grinning like a student who'd eaten his homework. Kirche babbled words about "more light." The screwbeliever stood silent, his red palm leaning on the handle, duty burned into his flesh. The rest of the crew wavered, eyes like candle flames in the train—some glowing at Ned, others crawling back to Nemo, because millimeters give more safety than courage.

Conseil made a hectic chalk mark, three lines across the ground, as if to remind us where we still are human. "You scream for air, but all you get is water," he growled. "Anyone who touches dies faster than they can count." Ned laughed softly. "Numbers save no one, only breath." "Breath without number is chaos," Conseil snarled. "Chaos is free," Ned grinned.

Nemo stood. But his gaze – empty. For seconds. No god, no captain, no damned priest. Just glass staring back. The crew felt it. Their knees vibrated. Slogans stumbled: "Upward air!" – too late. "Down work!" – too weak. Nemo was silent. And that was precisely the poison. The Nautilus held, despite it. Or perhaps because of it. I swore I heard the battery humming, as if it were counting itself.

Then it came: Nemo's shadow. No finger, no hand. His shadow on the record, black and long in the yellow. The shadow raised a finger. Just one. The air indicator moved, obedient as a dog. Millimeters down. Throats tightened, words became nails in the mouth. Nemo remained rigid, pupils dead. But his shadow directed, and the record obeyed.

"You see?" Ned grinned, "even if he dies, he still obeys me." "He doesn't obey anyone," I growled, "he obeys himself." Conseil pressed the chalk so hard against the floor that it broke, a splinter rolling away. Knife-Neck laughed, blood dripping onto the rubber mat. Kirche gasped, muttering, "More light." The Screw-Believer whispered a short prayer that sounded like a wrench. And the shadow raised the same finger once more, quite calmly. The slab nodded. Air remained solid, work remained heavy.

I looked at Nemo—the real Nemo, flesh and blood—and he wasn't there. Only the boat answered. Only the shadow spoke. We were extras in a play made of millimeters, and Ned got the punchline first. "Order dies," he said. "Rebellion breathes." I would have punched him if I'd still had breath. Instead, the Nautilus nodded, sneering, in a 3-2-3.

It tipped over faster than you can lie "Amen." One of the undecided ones—the one with the moist eyes—stumbled forward, reaching for the side valve, half by accident, half out of hunger. A brief jerk, a dirty clack, and then we heard it: the hissing of water that wants more than we have. A surge rushed into the pipe, not a tsunami, just an ugly foretaste, a spitting of the depths into our living room. The men screamed, not heroically, just like people who've been served the bill too soon.

The battery barked, high-pitched and aggressive, like a dog smelling blood. Cables twitched as if they were about to jump from the wall. The screen on the box began to steam, a white breath that smelled spirit before it could smell fire. Wedge creaked, not threateningly—warningly, like an old bone about to break. Nemo stood rigid, a shadow, but the plate stirred. Millimeters pulled air closer, work pushed us to our knees, making us feel how heavy flesh truly is.

Conseil moved faster than his heart: belt out, new knot, body across between the handle and the valve. "Back!" he yelled, his voice like chalk on glass. The screw-believer helped, placed his red palm on the metal, and pressed until it creaked. Knife-neck laughed maniacally, as if "floods" were a punchline. Kirche shrieked, "Light!" and grabbed blindly for the lamp. I swatted his hand away so hard he whimpered. Ned grinned, yelled, "See? He's already bleeding for us!"

And then we saw it: The water that jumped into the pipe didn't flow downward. It wasn't obeying gravity. It crept up the wall, became a ribbon, silvery, hissing, clinging to the ceiling like a snake that's gone the wrong way. It raced over our heads, glittering in the yellow, drops trembling like eyes. Only behind us did it fall—a whole torrent—splash onto the rubber mat, as if the depths had mocked us and said, "I can when I want."

We stood there with wet shoes, our throats tighter than ever, and the boat wasn't laughing. It was just breathing, in time, in a 3-2-3 rhythm, as if nothing had happened. And that was worse.

It was no longer a decision, it was an aftershock. The men stood dripping, water in their shoes, hearts in their throats, eyes like coins no one wanted to pay anymore. Conseil taped his belt tighter to the strut, as if he could stem the

entire descent with leather. His chalk was a mere stub, but he still wrote, crookedly, shakily, on the mat: LIFE. Messerhals laughed until he bled, "that's how you write death," he growled and stepped on it. Kirche whimpered, "more light," as if brightness would save him. The screw-believer held his red hand to the bulkhead, silent, a wedge incarnate.

Nemo finally stirred. His head lifted millimeters, his eyes not quite there, his mouth a crack in the concrete. "Order," he said. No tone, just judgment. Air pulled so hard that throats burned. Work pressed legs to the ground, as if we had to confess that we are filth. Light remained yellow, mocking, judging, always. Ned grinned despite everything. "Order dies, Nemo. Tomorrow we take the air. Tomorrow the lock is ours." His voice was not a scream, just a promise that tasted like rusty blood.

Conseil grabbed my arm and pulled me off the mat, his gaze a "not now"—the only thing that matters down here. Ned let us go because his theater was on intermission. But his chorus—three men, blind, addicted—were already standing like flags, ready to steal the next wind. Nemo ignored them. Or he couldn't. His shoulders were stones, his fingers stiff. And then his shadow twitched again, raised a finger, indicated no. The record nodded, sliders clicked into 3-2-3, automatically, cleanly, mockingly.

The chronometer on the wall performed an ugly trick: two seconds in one. Clack-clack in one breath, as if time itself wanted to steal applause. The coin in the glass half-turned, as if waving to an invisible witness. We all saw it. No one said it. Water dripped from the ceiling, cold, honest, and mingled with sweat. We stood there, shivering, crouching, in a boat that had long since had plans of its own. The mutiny wasn't over. It had merely been postponed, deeper in our lungs, where it simmered like a damned truth that would soon scream out.

Nemo goes crazy

Tomorrow without a tomorrow, a clock that knows no sun, only this yellow face above us that condemns everything, even the shitty atoms in the air. Ozone on the palate like an old battery kiss, spirit in the wipes that rubs the insides of your eyes out. Bilge holds its breath as if it doesn't want to disturb us as we suffocate. The wedge creaks in offense—a wooden prayer to the mechanics that no one hears. The battery purrs like a cat that has decided to lick us before it bites. Fuse box: a grumpy animal that's about to start telling

jokes about our fingers again. Glass: chalk rings, scratch marks, the ugly target that never hits, only reminds. The coin sticks inside, cheeky like guilty metal. And the plate, the holy asshole, obediently goes 3-2-3, as if it had never seen the night we tried to teach water electricity.

Nemo steps up to the plate, not tall, not dramatic. He doesn't reek of a hero, he smells of broken cable and cold anger. His fingers hover one knife cut over air, another over work, he ignores light – the yellow court always judges us, no priest is needed for that. "Order," he says. No sentence, no verb, no heart. Just the noun like a piston sinking into our lungs. Air tightens a tooth, the invisible hand that pinches your throat and says: There, now you know who you belong to. Work slides up half a grain of sand, knees become more honest. We collectively make that "hnn" sound you only make when millimeters decide whether you're human or beast. After that, Nemo is silent. Not the kind of silence that leaves space. The kind that steals space. For minutes he stares into the void, as if he had a second boat in there, one that belongs to him, in which we don't appear.

Ned's choir is about to start. You can feel it in the soles of his feet. Short—short—long wants to cut into your bones. Knifeneck wipes dried blood from his lip and checks his heel like other people check a blade. Church stares at the lamp as if light were a drink you can secretly pour yourself. The screw-believer raises the red map that was once his hand and prays silently into a wrench, without God, only habit. I taste iodine in my stomach, tar on my neck, cold whiskey in my memory—the holy trinity of disgusting comfort. "Breathe up," a throat tries somewhere, too quietly, too soon. The word dies in the throat, twists and falls out as a cough.

Conseil does what Conseil does: He takes out the chalk like a weapon that no one likes and that helps everyone. A line on the ground—rough, straight, rude—between us and the slab. "Breathe up to here," he growls. "Numbers behind it." He taps the chalk on the protective edge—tock—leaving a white prayer behind him. "No one goes over it without counting." He doesn't say it to us; he says it to the ground. The ground has better manners. He draws a second line across, a cut, like a facial scar through the belly of the boat. "Cut," he says. "I want to hear your knees, not your throats." He tucks the belt loosely around his hip, that honest leather that yesterday made the air a dog. Lift it once, let it fall again, so it knows what's coming.

The record purrs 3-2-3, as obedient as a pig that knows its way to the watering hole. And that's precisely why no one believes it. You can hear the twitch behind the beat, the false beat lurking. Nemo doesn't put his hand down. He's

a statue with lungs. "Order," he repeats, more quietly, as if speaking to his torso. Ned grins thinly; he breathes like someone who doesn't need the beat to know when to strike. He says nothing. He counts with his face, and his face is a threat. Knifeneck scrapes the chalk from the edge of the grid, just a spark to see if any numbers are bleeding. Kirche whispers "more light," but doesn't even get a look from Nemo. The screw-believer shifts his weight so that the cover looks deliberate.

"Breath in time," says Nemo. Words cost air, so he takes only one. "Breath." We breathe obediently, like beaten dogs. Short—short—long. I feel my ribcage crack, each rib a cog, eating into the next flaw. The lamp above us makes its yellow judgment, declaring every wrinkle a file. The fuse box murmurs. Battery hums warmly, offended. Wedge creaks, an old joint calculating. Glass sweats. Coin holds. Time ticks cowardly. Chronometer: clack—clack—clack. Honest as a liar who's learned to deceive you just enough that you tell yourself you deserve it.

“Eat your slogans,” hisses Conseil, drawing little chalk dots on the cut edge so that stupidity sticks to a grid before it shatters on the board. “He who speaks pays in thin air.” Ned barely lifts the corner of his chin. “He who remains silent dies beautifully,” he whispers, almost tenderly, as if he were slipping a ring on my finger. I step half an inch onto his shadow. He doesn’t step away. Shadows don’t have nerves. People do. I taste the remaining powder that lives in my gums like a dirty dream. I lie to myself that it’s just salt from a jar. The boat is listening. It always fucking does.

Nemo finally moves something, and it's not his face. It's the room. Air pinches a half millimeter further, the kind of insult you only notice when you've already paid too much. Work remains, so no one confuses "mercy" with "leniency." The light hangs lower, but not brighter. "Order," he says a third time, and I notice that his vocabulary has been shrinking for days, like skin in cold water. Nouns rule. Verbs are a luxury. Adjectives are lies. A man who speaks only nouns builds himself a museum and locks us in as exhibits.

"Three," says Conseil, and it's not an order—it's the number that screws your head onto your shoulders. One—two—three in the finger, in the leg, in the teeth. We feel slogans rising up and see their shame. Messerhals wants "breathe up." His mouth makes the H, and the throttle takes the rest away. Church wants "light," and the lamp answers with yellow, which means "fuck you." The screw believer says nothing. He just looks at the bulkhead seam, where steel tries to be a scar. I hate that I like him for it.

"No one touches the belt," says Conseil, quietly so only Leder hears. "No one goes cut. No one holds. We'll count the thing out of him." Out of whom? Out of Nemo? Out of the boat? Out of us? No answer. Answers are a luxury. What we have is human maintenance in a machine that long ago decided we're decoration. I take two steps along the line to sort through yesterday's needles in my knee. My kneecap says "work hard," my foot says "shut up."

The record stumbles briefly, not in 2-3-2, but more in a "gar nix," the kind of beat that pretends to be dead just to count your pulse. It recovers. Good. Disgusting. Nemo doesn't see it, or pretends not to. I see the cracks in his gaze, the empty spaces where no word lives. His pupils are windows into a blocked-off corridor. "Order," again, as if he'd just found that one poster that he sticks over every murder. It works. Millimeter-level obedience tastes like a familiar beating. You learn to anticipate it, and then call it discipline.

Ned shifts his weight. Very slightly. Just enough for his heel to tell the ground what will happen later. Conseil reacts before later becomes now: He lengthens the line, drawing it out like a broken note right up to the plate, without touching it, so the boat knows that we too can do lines. "Cut," he says again, and his voice has that thin, beautiful edge with which you save a friend's throat. The screw believer nods, once, heavily. Knifeneck snorts, still has blood in his laughter. Kirche licks his lips for yellow light. I place my fingers on the bulkhead; it is warm, like a forehead into which you press bad news.

A long silence. So long you can count your own teeth. Nemo doesn't see us. He looks at the record like someone looking in a mirror for the answer to a question no one has asked. The boat holds him—or holds us from him. 3-2-3. 3-2-3. Again and again. The chronometer ticks, cowardly, correctly. I want him to jump so I can hate someone who doesn't answer. He doesn't jump. He delivers. Cowards always deliver.

And then, just before the slogans finally slip from the bones into our throats, the depths play their new hobby: Condensation on the glass, to the right of Conseil's targets, pools into a line, horizontal, stubborn like a faulty ruler. Then another, above it, a bit crooked. A third, too thick, as if someone had poured too much ink into the air. Three lines that connect. A letter grows, as if the glass had grammar. An R, clean, impudent, with a leg and a belly. Behind it a U, a bulbous one, devouring light from within. Then an H, hard as an edge, with a horizontal line that never drips. PEACE. A missing letter hangs in the air like a promise. Not a drop falls. Not a line moves. The word remains stuck horizontally, as cheeky as the lie it conceals. For three beats, it pulses in a 3-2-3 pattern, as if the Nautilus itself were whispering: Shut up. Then it just stands

there, dry, as if the rules were on vacation and the boat now has a mouth of its own.

The lettering stuck in our brains like a knife handle: RUH. As if the boat itself had thought of the inside and hadn't bothered to finish the E. Quiet without an E isn't an order, it's a mockery. Nemo stood before it, a statue with breath. His eyes were two screws someone had tightened too much. "All right," he said again, but half the crew only heard the R from the condensation and the H in their own throats.

Ned did what he always does when a gap opens: He stepped into it. No stomping, no shouts of "breathe up!" He smiled crookedly and pulled the push-pull animal on an invisible leash. Short—long—short, on the knees, so quietly that only bones can hear it. Knife-neck joined in, his lip a red flag, and his heel said yes in the shadows. Kirche squinted at the lamp like an addict at a pharmacy. The screw-believer stayed with me, smelling of burnt flesh and duty. Conseil tightened the chalk between his fingers as if the pole were his last friend.

"Breathe in rhythm," said Nemo, barely a breath in his words, just millimeters playing commands. Air obediently answered, a touch too narrow, the room immediately taking on that "hnn" sound that sounds like a broken promise. Work stayed on the heavy gears, so no one confuses courage with recklessness. Light made its yellow dish, the kind of light that catches you lying and then calls your parents.

"If he talks like that," Ned whispered in my face, "then he's talking to him." He nodded toward the plate. "Not to us." "Then listen to him," I growled. "And tell me afterward why we're supposed to die." He grinned, his chin barely twitching. Knife-Neck took the hint, stroked the air above the belt with two fingers, as if stroking a pet that's allowed to hate him. "Don't," Conseil snapped, the chalk already held like a knife. "Count."

"One—two—three," muttered the screw-believer, his tone like a rusty crank that still turns. Kirche blew "more light" into his shirt where no one would hear. I put my hand on his ribcage. "Three—two—three," I said. "If you want to sing, sing numbers." He nodded, very small, as if his throat were an animal that would bite if you said "yes" too quickly.

The plate pretended to be nothing but brass and logic. And in that theater, the kind of thing happened that you only see twice before you decide whether to go crazy or be honest. Nemo remained silent. Not a back of a hand, not a

finger, not a damned muscle visibly twitched. But his shadow on the plate—the long, thin one the yellow court drew on the slider like a meanness—raised his index finger. I swear on anything that still has breath: The shadow raised it. Not Nemo's flesh. The shadow.

The hands obeyed. Air went down half a tooth. Work pushed a grain of sand up. Simultaneously, cleanly, as if someone had screwed a metronome into our throats. Our mouths became small, waterless trenches. "Not me," said Nemo, and it was the first time I believed him. He stood rigid as a shitty memorial stone, and his shadow played captain.

Ned laughed softly, toothless, with only that hole in his face that he calls humor. "He has brought us the truth," he whispered, "he doesn't belong to you, Nemo. He belongs to the one who speaks to him." "And who is that?" I asked too loudly, too honestly. Ned lifted his heel in counter-beat, as if that were answer enough.

Conseil took half a step forward, the chalk like a white claw. "The dividing line remains," he growled, "whoever crosses it makes the boat a priest." Knife-neck snarled, showing his teeth, but did nothing. He had that twitch in his stomach that makes you lie and still wait. Kirche weighed the lamp with his eyes, counting the filament windings like beads on a rosary. The screw-believer placed his weight on the damaged arm so I'd have something to hate that wasn't human.

Nemo stared at the plate as if he'd never seen it before. "Separate," he said. Just that. No explanation, no direction. The boat understood better than we did. Air still pinched a breath, work braked the legs deeper into the ground, light remained a judge, indifferent and thorough. "He's negotiating without us," whispered Conseil, and that "without" was a hole in the word.

I approached Nemo, close enough to smell the ozone film on his skin. "Look at me," I said, "not him." He looked through me, looked through the wall, probably looked into that second passage behind his eyes where the boat carves his answers into hackneyed nouns. "All right," he repeated. I could have punched him in the face, just to hear if flesh still spoke. I didn't. I had the numbers in my hand, not courage.

"Slowly," Ned whispered into the room, and the room obeyed him, which I hate and yet need. The counter-tact crept beneath the soles: short—long—short, a poison you don't see because it tastes like thinking. Three men answered with

their knees. No scream, no shout. Footsteps. The kind of footsteps that make mutiny seem harmless, until it bites you.

Conseil drew the chalk line thicker, painting over the old one like a scar that wants to stay fresh. "You humans stay here," he said, "beyond that, you're bills." Kirche giggled and stopped himself from giggling, startled by his own laughter. Messerhals broadened his shoulders as if threatening the belt. The belt ignored him. Leather ignores heroes.

In this strange peace—men with boots full of anger, Nemo with a head full of wire, a boat with a sense of humor—we heard a flat, ugly hum from the fuse box that sounded like "right away." The battery responded with a deeper hum, as if someone were stroking its fur against the grain. "Not now," Conseil hissed at the box, as if machines understand sentences written in chalk on tongues. Maybe they do.

"He'll show us," whispered Ned, pointing at the sliders with the edge of his chin. "He can do it without hands." "So what," I snarled, "we could do it without brains." "Then we're even," he grinned. I wanted to strangle him. I wanted to thank him, because his anger held us together like bad bread.

Nemo flinched. Not much. A blink that wasn't one, more like a shadow, making a mistake at the edge of his face. His shadow—not his flesh—raised its index finger again. Air gave way, just a breath this time, a merciful pity that offends you. Work remained difficult. And I understood something gruesome: the boat lets us breathe so we can listen longer.

"Count," said Conseil, and his tone was like a doctor without a bed. "One—two—three." The number fit like a wedge in his throat. Knife-neck hooked his heel to the beat, Kirche whispered one syllable too many, which the room pulled from his mouth. The screw-believer nodded in time, this one with grease on it. Ned stood a touch too close to the dividing line. I placed my boot on his shadow. He didn't step away. He smiled, lazily, dangerously.

"If his shadow plays captain," I said quietly to Nemo, "then whose do you belong?" He didn't answer. Perhaps, I thought, he already belongs to the word "order" more than to us. A man who shrinks himself to nouns is nothing more than a poster. Posters can burn. Boats can't.

The RUH didn't come off the glass. The missing letter grinned invisibly. The coin stuck stubbornly, as if it had signed a contract during the night. The chronometer ticked cowardly, the only honest lie in the room. 3-2-3

hammered, a heart of tin. Ned finally raised his voice, just a crack: "He who breathes, lives. Who owns your breath?" "The Flat," someone said. "Me," said Ned. "No one," said Conseil. "The Deep," I said, because I couldn't think of anything better, and everything was simultaneously true and therefore useless.

"Don't touch it," Conseil snarled as Messerhals measured the strap with his eyes. "I'm not touching anything," Messerhals smiled, and there's always a finger in that kind of lie. He let it hang in the air, just below the leather, so close that the silence thickened. The screw-believer laid his burned arm across, not harshly, just definitively. "Leave it," he said, and the word was a wrench that fits.

Then the little spell burst through the world a second time, like a louse through a priest's brow: Nemo's body remained stone. His shadow raised its finger. Not a swirl, not a wobble—a clear, geometric lift on the plate. The air indicator slid one idea further down, work made the countermovement, light remained this greasy dish. Space simultaneously drew in larynxes and withdrew words. I held Nemo by the forearm; there was flesh, there was pulse, there was man. But the power was on the ground, in the drawing of light and dirt. The shadow was the hand. The slider obeyed the shadow.

"Seen," Conseil said, matter-of-factly, as if signing a death certificate. Ned closed his eyes for a moment, as if practicing a kiss he intended to give the boat later. Knife-Neck rested his forehead against the strap and gave a short, disgusting laugh. Kirche whispered, "More light"—reflex—and gritted his teeth because air was stealing it from him. The screw-believer muttered a screw sequence that only mechanics understand.

I wanted someone to say "miracle" just so I could hit them. No one did me that favor. Instead, the record remained silent, like a sin in adjustment. The shadow lowered its finger again, unhurried. Air gave us back half a millimeter—not mercy, administration. Work remained hard because punishment always takes longer than breathing. 3-2-3 counted us together. 2-3-2 lurked in the knees of Ned's choir.

I let go of Nemo. "If you fall," I said, "don't pull us with you." "All right," he replied—and I swore it wasn't him who said it. It was the shadow, through his mouth. Or the boat, through his blowhole.

The last bottle

The bottle lay there like something found in a bad prayer: sticky, brown sun in its belly, label half torn off, cork brittle like an old lie. No one knew who had "found" it; everyone knew it had been watching us longer than we had. The table clung to it, our fingers stuck to the table, and the air clung to our necks, as if it were afraid we might get the idea of splurging. The lamp made its yellow judgment that finds everyone guilty, even those who merely breathe. The battery purred in offense. The fuse box grumbled. The wedge creaked, a wooden tooth that doesn't want to loosen but knows it must. Glass: chalk rings, scratch marks, that target that hits nothing and yet counts everything. The coin stuck inside, as if it had decided to stop talking to us.

Nemo stepped forward like a priest confiscating a relic. His finger two knife-tips above air, half a ghost above work, ignoring light because the yellow court never rules in our favor. "Order," he said, as if that were already the confiscation. "Confiscation," he added, as if that were the order. He didn't lift the bottle. He looked at it, and the plate obeyed: air -½, work +¼. One could hear the*hnn*Going through our throats, this collective "fuck you" that only comes out as a groan because words consume too much oxygen. Knees became heavier, thoughts faster, anger grew teeth.

Ned grinned narrowly. "The last bottle," he said, "is not called possession. It is called an oath." He placed two fingers flat against the neck of the bottle, precisely not grasping, precisely provocative. "He who drinks from it does not say*please*. He says*I swear*." Messerhals wiped the dried snot from his lip and glared. Kirche whispered "Light," even though the bottle couldn't glow, only burn. The screw-believer stood silent, red map clenched in his fist, duty woven into his tendons.

"Just medicine," Conseil snapped, and the word sounded like a knot. He placed the tin cup next to it, the spoon on top, the old liturgy: dose instead of stupidity. "Rinse wounds. Save breath. No heroes." He drew a line around the bottom of the bottle with chalk, a neat circle, as if the glass were a grenade. "No one crosses the line without a number." He wrote*1—2—3*next to the cork, small, scratchy, angry. "Three sips don't exist. There are drops."

"Confiscated," Nemo repeated, as if he had to convince the wall, not us. Air remained lower, work remained harder, light remained judgment. I hated how efficient millimeters are when they're supposed to educate people. "You can't drink order," said Ned. "But you can drown it." "You can only drink away what's yours," I said, "and down here, the most you own is your next mistake." Ned

smiled, the kind of smile that lets you know he'll take something no one else would begrudge him later.

Conseil took the spoon and tapped it against his neck:*tock*The sound crept into our teeth like a sermon. The cup smelled of old rum from the boiler room, whiskey from the harbor air, metal from the bilge. "Only for cuts, only for stitches, only for—" "—for courage," Ned chimed in. "For courage that can count." "Courage is an overdose," Conseil growled. "I'll dose." He pointed to the chalk line. "Whoever breaks the circle gets the air bill."

The crew approached like dogs to a meat platter. Two undecided men breathed too fast, as if they wanted to eat the scent. Messerhals's eyes turned to knives; Kirche held the lamp in his sight like a fly to sugar. The screw-believer placed his burned arm next to the bottle, as if to bless it with pain. Nemo stood there and let the platter speak: 3-2-3, clean, sneering. Every third blow was a slap. Every second a warning. The rest, a tin laugh.

"Count first," Conseil ordered, and he raised the spoon: a knife-tip full of brown sun, down into the cup, diluted with water that tasted like coins. "Rinse your mouth, don't drink it." Messerhals snorted. "I'm rinsing with blood." "Then rinse twice," I said. Kirche raised the cup, trembling, and Conseil gently slapped the back of his hand.*paf*"Don't start, Lightboy." "Just a touch," he begged. "A touch is a decision," said Conseil, "and we have too few left."

Ned longed for the theater, yet played quietly. "Oath on the neck," he whispered, lifting the bottle a finger's breadth from the table—not above the chalk line, just enough for the room to notice. "I swear air," he said, and his two idiots nodded in unison, as if words had valves. Nemo didn't even raise an eyebrow. "Separate," he said into the machine, and the machine tightened the throats of all of us, as if it had just decided that words must pay a tax.

I wanted to smell the cork, just to be sure the world still stinks of something other than metal. I didn't. I stared at the bottle's belly, at the brown heaviness within, at the small, oily glimmers that claim to be comfort. Conseil held out the spoon to me. "For the hand," he said, "not the head." I took the tip, wiped the fingertips that had been burning since the electric shock, and it stung just right, that honest burning that knows work and mocks heroism. "Still?" "No." I lied. He knew.

"Air up," Ned rehearsed quietly, just to see how far the yellow would carry. "Work down," Knife-Neck answered out of habit. Nemo didn't turn anything. The record did it for him: air pinched another eighth, work squeezed another

grain of sand. Slogans withered in his throat. Math won. I felt the men's hatred, how it didn't spread, but became a wedge. Wedges hold. Until they break.

"Inventory," said Conseil, to himself or to God or to the canvas. He tilted the bottle, and the brown world within opened its thick, sluggish neck. Three fingers? Two? More like one and a half, if one is honest—and no one was honest today. "For wounds, for dying throats, for—" "—oaths," whispered Ned again. "For us," spat Knifeneck. "For light," squeaked Kirche. "For order," said Nemo. The word was a blow. It didn't hit the bottle. It hit us.

I forced my gaze back to my stomach, because that's where the truth resides when it's too heavy to swallow. And then the little magic happened that made me simultaneously sober and drunk with rage. An amber ring detached itself from the bottom of the bottle. It didn't do what liquids do. It came off like a label, clean, cheeky, and rose up the inside wall. Not with bubbles, not with foam. A ring that ignores physics. It climbed the glass as if it had fingernails and stayed at the top, just below the neck, solid, without purchase, a halo for drunks. For three beats, it pulsed in the accursed 3-2-3. Short—short—long. I heard Ned laugh softly, I didn't hear Conseil breathe, I heard the record purr with delight. Nemo wasn't looking. He must have felt it, because Luft tightened a hair, as if to stifle the miracle. The ring remained, thin and bold, for three bars. Then it acted as if it had never been there, didn't slide down, disappeared as if the glass had swallowed it.

"Medicine," Conseil said very calmly, as if the word were glued to his lips. "Oath," Ned murmured, as if he were marrying it. "Confiscated," Nemo repeated. I raised my spoon, not for courage, but just to keep myself busy. "Screw it," I whispered, "we're already broken." The men understood me—unfortunately.

Ned turned the bottle into a market stall in hell. No prices, just conditions. "Sip for pace," he said, and the men became dogs trained to numbers. He placed the cup next to the circle, the bottle in the center, the cork pointing north like a compass needle to ruin. "Counter-tact brings dose," he whispered, and his two idiots—Knifeneck and Church—nodded as if they'd practiced it in their mothers' wombs. Short—long—short with the heel, clean, nasty, quiet. The screw-believer stood halfway between the bottle and the choir, duty on two legs, red map visible so everyone would know that there are things you don't earn but owe.

"Just medicine," Conseil repeated, but his voice had that hairline crack that comes with being both a notary and a pallbearer. He drew ration lines on the

cup with chalk—three thin marks, barely thicker than eyelashes. "Up to here: wound. Up to here: throat dying. Above: stupidity." He took the spoon and tapped his neck:*tock*Then he dipped exactly a knife-tip into the brown belly and mixed it with water that smelled of coins. "Not for courage. Courage is poison." Ned smiled. "Sometimes poison is the only doctor who makes house calls."

The record listened, the lousy, educated tin. Air pinched another eighth, work pushed a grain of sand. No drama—just the kind of punishment you only notice when you're saving syllables while cursing. The yellow court hung lower, counting wrinkles like sins. Battery purred, fuse box grumbled, wedge creaked—our chorus of ugly gods. "He's sealing us up," coughed Knifeneck. "Then learn to breathe," Nemo cut in, without looking at us. "Order." A noun like a blow.

“Rules,” said Ned. “Who*short—long—short*dances, gets*a*Drops in the cup. Who*two*Rounds, gets*a*Drops right on your neck. If you stumble, you'll drink nothing—except air." He looked at me, that thin smile that reeks of argument. "You're counting?" "I'm separating," I growled, and stood at the cutting line so his little religion at least has an altar where I can spit.

Kirche wanted it right away. He placed his heel on point A, the ball of his foot on nothing, and let his knees bend as if they were old hinges. Short—long—short. The chalk under the sole made*krr*, so thin that only Schuld heard it. Conseil took the spoon, dipped*barely*into the cup, held the tip out to the guy. "Gargle. Spit. Don't swallow." Kirche gargled, spat, and grinned like a child lying for no reason. "Yet," he begged. "Yet only brings smoke to your brain," said Conseil. "Smoke makes light," squeaked Kirche. "Light makes corpses," I concluded.

Knifeneck stamped like a dressage horse taught to text pride. Short—long—short, clean, nasty, extra quiet, so the record can love him. Ned raised a finger, approved. Conseil saw it and put the spoon to the neck of the bottle. "Just lips," he said. Knifeneck let his tongue kiss the glass lip once, a sickening, tender breath. You could hear his pupils dilate. "Oath," Ned whispered. Knifeneck nodded. "Oath." Goddamn it.

The two undecided men stood at the grid, their knees wobbling as if they had yet to learn how to forbid their bodies from being smart. The screw-believer held his red hand at table height, stopping movements that weren't meant to become sentences. "I don't do auctions," he grumbled. "I do work." "Then take*three*steps,” grinned Ned, “and you get*nothing*. Work is free." The man blinked slowly, as if he were putting his sense of humor somewhere between a

string and a screw. Then he took the three steps after all. Conseil held out the cup, empty; he drank water that tasted of insult. "That's how you learn," he said calmly, "without a stage."

Nemo stood like a memorial stone. No hand on metal, no movement in his shoulder. And yet the plate obeyed the silence: 3–2–3—*hnn*—3–2–3. Millimeters taught us how to let the word "please" rust in our throats. I felt the hatred in the room like a draft of thoughts getting lost on the way to murder. The chronometer ticked cowardly on, too accurate to be honest. The coin stuck inside, mocking, as if it had paid admission and was now sitting in the front row.

“Round two,” Ned crooned. “This time*two*Round push-pull, then*a*Drops on my neck." Kirche was first. Short—long—short—pause—short—long—short. Clean? No. Humiliatingly real. Conseil was stricter than any judge and still gave: a tiny brown blade to the lip, more pain than comfort. Kirche closed his eyes and pretended God was alcohol. "More light," he breathed reflexively. "Light eats breath," said Nemo. "Breath pays for light," spat Ned.

Knife-neck stepped out with that disgusting charm that only men have who carry blood in their laughter. His boots danced as if they had a conductor in the soles. Short—long—short—short—long—short. Ned nodded to him. Conseil hesitated, then raised the glass, not the cup—the neck itself, for a second, and let a*track*Rolling whiskey over Knife-Neck's gums. It wasn't much; it was enough to polish his eyes. "Oath," he said again, deeper this time. "Oath." I hated how good that sounded coming out of his mouth.

The undecided decided that a lie was better than no story at all. They took steps, one stumbled, fell off the mark, and tore a chalk line like skin. Conseil gave him water with vengeance in it. "One more time," he commanded. "Or not at all." The man tried again. This time he hit the mark—just enough to get him out of it. Learning means being able to wait until anger has useful legs. The drug in the memories made my tongue salty. I bit it to avoid saying "mine."

"Breathe up," Ned breathed—just as a test. The plate didn't. It did the opposite. Air pinched another eighth note, work pressed us deeper into our knees. Nemo didn't speak. His shadow hands on the plate marked the command. We coughed out words that never became sentences. Conseil raised the spoon higher, as if he had to show it to the boat to even be allowed to hand out cans. "One," he said. The spoon poked into the cup. "Two." Water mixed comfort small. "Three." Drops. The choir breathed again. Not better. Just orderly.

"Auction closed," I shouted before Ned could command the next bid. "The bottle belongs to the wounds." "The wounds belong to us," he grinned. "Then sew them up," Conseil snarled. "With dirt?" asked Knifeneck. "With silence," said Conseil, and I realized how much I needed this man and simultaneously hated him as a mirror.

Kirche squinted at the emergency flare hanging on the wall like a temptation with an address. "A tiny fire," he squeaked, "for God." "God doesn't drink oil," I cut in, and my hand was on his wrist faster than his brain could utter the wish. The screw-believer placed his red hand on Kirche's shoulder, heavy enough to press the trembling into the ground. "Breathe," he said. "Count," said Conseil. "Order," said Nemo. Ned just smiled and let his heel say the answer: short—long—short.

Conseil drew the chalk line on the cup thicker until the markings became a mathematical insult. "He who drinks over it, pays in air," he said. "He who lies, pays in work." He wrote*FAULT*small against the rim of the cup. "Debt is a currency without change," I muttered. "Then take credit," Ned scoffed. "Later," promised Knife-Neck. Later is our biggest creditor.

For a moment, I searched the world outside: the glass, the chalk rings, the scratch marks, the ugly target. The coin inside didn't move. The chronometer ticked stubbornly. The plate vibrated—3-2-3—as if it had bought us. The bottle smelled of harbor, of the quayside, of an evening that would never return. The cork stood crooked, slightly tilted, as if it had a plan. I thought how easy it would be to rip it out, to dump everything in trenches, to set the world on fire so that no one would ask for mercy anymore.

“One more round,” breathed Ned, “but this time dance*her*for*him*." He nodded to the plate, and three men—God curse them—put*at the same time*“short—long—short.” The ground responded with a dry*krr—krr—kaa*As if our soles had become stamps stamping a surrender. Conseil pressed his lips together, raised his spoon—ration, dose, poverty. Nemo stood still, breathing like someone taxing his own blood. The battery purred in approval, the yellow court grinned, Keil crunched his rosy psalm.

I turned my gaze back to the bottle, to find the truth where it lies most cheaply. The cork protruded from the neck like a little priest. I swear, he was breathing. A tremor ran through the brittle fellow—*not*from our hand,*not*of a vibration that could be excused somewhere. In the basic rhythm, clean, bold:*short—short—long*. At*long*he turned himself a quarter beat, dry, audible, as if rubber over glass were speaking a syllable.*tik—tik—taaak.*No one touched it. No one

dared to blink. Ned grinned like a thief in a church. Conseil held the spoon still, as if it had suddenly turned to metal. Nemo said nothing. The record hummed 3-2-3, and the cork was now tilted more crookedly, as if he had understood that we were voting with him today.

Confessions began down here like everything else: without God, with filth. The bottle stood between us like an unblinking eye. The cork breathed crookedly, a compass needle pointing to misery. Nemo clung to his nouns like a drowning man to wood. "Order," he said to the bottle, as if it could confer ranks. "Separate." No subject, no verb, just those skinny bricks used to build prison walls. His voice had no place for us; it rolled along the slides like cold grease.

Ned smiled, the elegant bastard, and held the neck with two fingers, as if the glass were a chin he was about to kiss off a lie. "Oath," he whispered. "Upward air. Downward work." Words like matchsticks, dry, ready. The choir behind him—Knifeneck with the red flag on his upper lip, Church with the stage fright, the two undecideds who like to do the right thing as long as it tastes like the wrong thing—breathed too fast. The screw-believer positioned himself between finger and bottle, red hand open so greed could feel how warm guilt can be.

“Confession is measured,” Conseil growled, pushing his tin cup so close to the circle that the chalk scraped. “He who lies, flushes. He who boasts, sews. He who*drinks*Do it when he's bleeding, not before." He took the spoon like a pair of tongs and placed it coolly on the bridge of Knife-Neck's nose, right over the dried trail of blood. "Say it with bones, not liquor." Knife-Neck rasped a laugh. "I pissed into that wedge's prayer yesterday," he boasted, "and he didn't even say 'Amen.'" Conseil pressed the spoon a touch harder. "You pissed into a machine," he said, "that can bury you tomorrow without anyone getting their hands dirty." Knife-Neck grinned wider, the kind of harbor smile that only knows teeth. "Then let her try."

Kirche held the cup with both hands as if it were a wafer. "Light plus a sip," he begged, "just a sip, just so the yellow stops counting me." I took the cup from him and clapped it on the table. "The yellow counts even if you die, boy." Nemo ignored us all, smelling instead of ozone and inheritance. He didn't raise his hand, and the record was still his dog. Air remained scarce, work remained a stone, light remained a judge. 3-2-3 nailed us.

"I confess," said Ned. "I confess that I use you to squeeze air out of metal." An honest sentence, as rare as fresh peaches in a bilge. "I confess," he added, "that I'll do it again if the timing is right." I looked at him and hated that he said

it out loud. Conseil twitched the chalk. "One—two—three," he hissed, and the number lifted the room like a car jack. "Next up. No drama."

The screw believer cleared his throat, the red map twitched. "I put my hand in it when it burned," he said, his voice like a blunt saw, "and I'd do it again. Not for God. For threads." He showed the flesh, which looked as if someone had drawn a topography of stupidity on skin. "Bottle isn't for me." He still got a drop on the spoon, which couldn't promise anything. Conseil tapped the wound, the man grumbled and nodded, as if he had to politely thank physics.

"I confess," Kirche began, and his gaze slid to the lamp as if it had a confessional window. "Yesterday I stole a light in my head. Only in my head. Only so..." "So you'll forget," I helped him. He nodded childishly. "I don't take a sip if I'm not allowed to. But I—" "You're breathing wrong," Conseil snapped. "Breathe right. Then your head will talk less bullshit." He gave Kirche water so his mouth would have something to do. The boy gurgled like someone who wants to pray at sea and finds only foam.

Nemo finally placed two fingers on the edge of the plate. Not pressing, just threatening. "Atonement," he said, and I felt the word grease my tongue. "Atonement," he repeated to the bottle, as if it were a mirror dispensing penance. Ned laughed softly, a dark sound that insults tin. "Atonement is for priests, Nemo. We're dock rats. We're the ones who have to carry the altar when the rain goes down."

"I confess," I said, although no one had asked. "I confess that I would rather see you die than help you murder. And I confess that I'll do it anyway, if the air compels me." The sentence tasted like a coin. Conseil looked at me like a nail that could still be used.

"Enough," decided Nemo, priest in cable break. Air pulled another tooth, work pressed us deeper, the yellow court hung like a mockery. Ned didn't let that stop him. "Ritual," he said. "Oath on the neck." He pushed the bottle to the edge of the circle, so that the chalk shattered and the line turned into flakes. "Whoever*Air high*kicks, gets*Truth*to the lip. Whoever*Work down*kicks, gets*courage*to the tongue. Whoever*Order*prays, may gargle on the cup." The men laughed reluctantly. Laughter under the knife is merely a muscle twitch.

Conseil created countermagic: He marked the edge of the neck with three tiny chalk dots, so delicate that only guilt would see them. "Stop here," he murmured. "Dose here. End here." He raised the spoon—sheer mercy in metal—and looked at Nemo. "Do you permit medicine?" Nemo didn't answer.

His shadow on the plate twitched. The air made*hnn*, work*mm*, The light remained the same impudent sun. Decision without man.

Messerhals wanted to exploit the gap. "I confess I almost pulled the valve yesterday," he grinned, "just to hear the sound of water, if we're right." I kicked him in the shin, not hard, just enough to make his heroism cough. "Right is the name stupidity gets when it wears a uniform," I said. "Sit down." He didn't sit down, but his lurking was audible.

Kirche reached for the cup again, ridiculously, decently. "For your forehead," he whispered. Conseil nodded, gave him the spoon, dipped the tip of the knife into the whiskey, then into water, and rubbed it on the small gash the box had given him. Kirche whined briefly, then smiled, that broken, good-natured smile you forgive men because the world has never negotiated with them. "Yet," he begged reflexively. "No." "A touch." "No." Sometimes the best prayer is a no.

Ned flicked his finger at the cork, not hard, just disrespectfully. "One more confession: I want you," he said to the bottle. "Not because you're comfort. Because you're fuse." He looked at the emergency flare hanging on the wall like a promise with a tally. "Later," he murmured, quieter than greed. "Later, we'll make fire out of truth." Conseil lifted the canvas, showing it to him like a burned flag. "Later, we all die," he said smoothly. "Not today."

I noticed how my fingers were gripping the spoon too tightly, how it had become a blade you'd rather carry inside you than in the next person. "One more confession," I said. "And then the drama will stop." The undecided did what their name suggests: They waited until words found their shoes. One stammered, "I dreamed the boat—" "Dreams are off duty," Nemo snapped, and I knew he'd said the sentence for himself, not for us.

The battery gave an offended*wrrr*The fuse box snapped its teeth, the wedge crunched like a widow counting old scores. The record was pure rhythm. 3-2-3. 3-2-3. I hated how regular an executioner can be.

"Final confession," said Ned, and he meant "today." "I'll kiss the lock when you empty again, Nemo." He said it without anger, only with that polite threat that replaces knives in harbor bars. Half the men felt their knees say yes, even as their hands protested. Conseil stared at him as if he were about to force the whole cork down his throat.

And then came the lousy little miracle that explains the world to us without apology. No one blew. No one sang. Breath was heavy in their throats. But at

the neck of the bottle, right where Conseil's three chalk dots had been stuck, a note rose. First thin, almost embarrassing, then brazen. A whistle, dry as a sharp wind, without wind, without mouth. It cut through the yellow, through the chalk, through us, and it had—of course—a beat: 2–3–2. Short—long—short, cheeky, wrong, perfect. The bottle whistled push-pull into the room as if it had lungs. Three sequences, clean; on the long beat, the cork vibrated visibly without a hand near it. Ned laughed so quietly that only Guilt heard him. Conseil froze, the spoon froze halfway through. Nemo didn't blink. The record purred back 3–2–3, insulted. Two systems in one neck. One made of glass. One made of tin. And we stood between them, with tongues too long to remain silent and too short to hold the truth.

The whistling in the bottle neck was still in our ear bones,**2–3–2**Like a cheeky finger on the beat, Church pulled the world in the wrong direction. He stared at the yellow that had been counting him for days, as if there were a god inside there finally saying his name, and his hand jerked towards the emergency flare. No battle cry, no "attention"—just that embarrassing, holy sound addicts make when they think they've got an idea. "A spark," he whispered, "just one, and the head will calm down." His gaze was glass, his mouth a crack. The screw-believer raised the red map, too late. Knifeneck rasped a laugh that smelled of oil. Ned didn't even nod. He let him go, like you let an animal into water to see if it wants to swim or die.

"Don't," Conseil hissed, but the word was already empty, and air costs air. Kirche reached out, pulled. The torch leaped from its holder, dry, insulted. I was on him before his brain spelled "fire": hand around wrist, rib to rib, kneecap in the mat. "Lie down," I snarled. He wrestled, not hit, begged: "A breath. Only that the yellow—" "—doesn't count you anymore?" I cut. "The yellow counts until the ashes." The screw-believer grabbed his shoulder, weight without brutality, as if duty were heavy enough. "Breathe," he said. "Count," Conseil said. His chalk drew a cross over Kirche's ankle, rough, crooked, rude. "Up to here."

Nemo stood, a priest without a sacrament, and let the record preach with millimeters of precision. Air pulled a tooth, work pressed on bones that were already tired yesterday. "Atonement," he said. No tone, no direction. Just the noun, like a short whiplash through our necks. The fuse box made an offended zzrrp, the battery barked underneath. Wedge creaked like an old man pushing a cart no one wants. The lamp above us hung in the yellow court, pretending to be the sun. I felt someone tightening the nails in my skull.

Kirche still had the torch. A hand's breadth from his grip, the wick still dark, only the thought hot. Conseil ripped up the canvas, wet, stinking of spirit, and threw it over his fingers as if to stifle a bad confession. "Out," he growled. Kirche gasped, trembled, wept the short, ugly cry of men who realize they don't know their own hand. Ned was beside me, smiling thinly, that polite meanness of harbor and hope. "One spark turns truth into fire," he crooned. "One spark turns you into smoke," I snarled. "And our lungs into a bucket."

Knife-neck smelled the circus and positioned himself so he could see it when it started. "Just a minute, then it's cozy," he grinned, showing his tooth. I stepped on his toes. "You're confusing Hell with Heilig." "Heilig is starving down here," he spat back. "Hell eats faster," said Conseil, grabbing the handle, but Kirche held the torch, the canvas slipped, and that's when the boat made its joke.

The box spat sparks—little, angry fleas—the lamp hummed and suddenly became a stage. No hiss, no roar; just a shush, which can fill a room when rage already resides within. I tugged at Kirche's forearm, the squeamish believer pressed with his red hand, Conseil pushed the canvas deeper until water flowed back into the fibers. Nemo didn't lift his fingers, only lifted the word: "Atonement." Air cut—not a tooth, a knife. A collective hnn; throats like cords about to snap.

Church—oh God, that idiot with the stars in his skull—picked the torch past the screen, a finger's breadth of wick exposed. A spark jumped somewhere—not big, just enough for a "Now?" I heard the battery growl, the record purr, the cabinet grumble—our ugly orchestra. My knuckles were white against the back of his hand, "let go" my only psalm. "Just a kiss," he slurred, "then the voices will be silent." "Yours, perhaps," growled the idiot. "Ours will scream louder then."

The bottle on the table tilted internally—the cork vibrated as if it had learned the cue. The neck whistled 2-3-2 again, thinner, more dangerous, as if the depths were blowing catchy tunes into our brains. "Don't," Conseil gasped, "gas." Too late for reason, too early for remorse. Kirche's thumb rubbed the friction wheel, ever so lightly, a scratching tic. A spark leaped, blind, hungry. I saw it fly. I felt its smell. I hated how I wanted it, just to know if it would call us liars.

The screen made its hissing noise—the old, good old "I'll take your heat away," with which it bought our lives yesterday. Ned stood so still you could hear his greed. Knife-neck counter-beated his foot, short—long—short, quiet, cheeky; a slogan in the shadows. Nemo said nothing. His shadow raised a finger on the

screen, and air pushed us even deeper to our knees, until prayers became too expensive. "Atonement," again, technology as debt counseling.

The spark touched the wick. It did what fire does: it made fire. A brief kiss, a quick panty affair between flame and fabric. I saw it, I swear, I smelled it: that first, sinful pf that a flame makes when it thinks the world is its own. The canvas hissed angrily across it, spirit smelled of the hospital, of fear, of "not yet." Kirche gasped, Messerhals laughed, Ned whispered "yes." I heard the locks in my head that all heroes have in their bellies spring open. And then the fire did something expensive books can't type for.

It crawled back. Not out. Not away. Backwards. The flame crawled along the wick.**in**the fiber inside, an orange worm that knows the wrong path. No heat, no flickering, no smoke that wants to rise. It ran in, disappeared in, as if the wick had a throat that swallowed. The lamp remained cold, so cold that I placed my fingers on it and froze. I froze. I, with torch in hand, sweat on my brow. The flame was gone, not out, gone, vanished into the wick, as if it lived inside. For a single breath, the world was silent with insult.

"Seen," Conseil breathed, and his "seen" was the most sobering sentence of the day. Kirche howled, not in pain, but in loss, the way children cry when someone explains the sea to them. Knife-Neck's laughter died down like a bet. Ned looked as if he'd found a new church. Nemo didn't blink. The boat breathed 3-2-3, deeply, contentedly.

I grabbed Kirche's hand, broke the handle, ripped the torch off him for good, and shoved the cloth over the wick until water gushed. "Stop," I snarled. The screw-believer took the rest from his fist, slowly, with the kind of tenderness that duty teaches men who've been on the sidelines too often. Conseil laid the wet cloth like a blanket on a sleeping baby. "Close," he said to the box. The box finally shut up.

"Atonement," said Nemo—the same noun, but this time it came like something from an underground garage that no longer has a car. Air remained knife. Work remained anvil. Light remained judge. I knew that on days like these, men like to believe God is nudging them with a mission. Ned reached for the bottle, not greedily, tenderly, and placed it on the protective edge of the plate, as if decorating an altar. "See, Father?" he said into the brass. "Even your lamp knows when to stay home. We'll take the rest."

"Over my dead body," Conseil said, without pathos. "We're sharing drops, not fires." He drew three new ration lines on the cup, thin and grim. "And anyone

who lights anything again will get my hand around their throat." Messerhals snorted. "Your hand is chalk." "My hand is my belt," Conseil said, and he was right: the strap on the air lever was like a leash on a bad dog.

Kirche shrugged his shoulders as low as possible, as if he could disappear into them. "It was just a kiss," he whimpered. "A kiss of fire." "Kisses cost saliva," I said, "down here they cost air." I lifted his chin, looked into his ugly, good-natured face. "Breathe. Three—two—three. That's all you can do today."

"He's turned his back on us," muttered the screw-believer, referring to the fire. "Or he's seen that no one here deserves a lung," said Knife-Neck. "Or he knows his place isn't outside," Ned crooned. "But in the wick. Inside. Like him." He nodded toward the slab. It was the most disgusting comparison made today. And the most honest.

The lamp remained cold, impudent, and insolent. And then the world returned its insult to us in writing. A thin, gray thread of smoke crept from the lampshade, neat, without heat, as if someone were writing with cold ink. It drew a zigzag line in the air, clear, concise, and bold:**3–2–3**Short—short—long. A beat of smoke that wouldn't rise, wouldn't dissipate, wouldn't disappear. For three beats, it stood in the air, as if someone had made their breath visible. Then it didn't disintegrate. It slipped backward and was gone, as if the air had rolled it up.

"Holy shit," I said, without any religion. Ned grinned, Conseil narrowed his eyes, Nemo wasn't looking. The record hummed its law. We stood there like people watching a knife run backward. Kirche's hands trembled, empty. The cork in the bottle's neck vibrated once more, lazily, in time. And this space—this cursed, yellow, stinking belly of the Nautilus—suddenly felt like it no longer allowed us to do things in the right direction.

Ned placed the bottle on the protective edge of the table as if it were a damned altar. He had that elegant snottiness on his face that only men who believe they've partnered with the devil have. "Air up, work down," he murmured, and the words sounded like a toast. Knife-Neck cackled bloodily, Kirche stared at the yellow as if the lamp might bless at any moment. The screw-believer pressed his red stump onto the table, a weight called duty. The two undecided men clung to the grid like a railing that hasn't seen land for a long time.

Conseil hissed, drawing the chalk thicker: "Cuts remain. Drops are wounds, not oaths." His fingers had that old doctor's grip that saves you whether you like it

or not. I stood between Ned and the plate, feeling the warmth of the sliders like breath. "You're making a religion out of dirt," I said. Ned grinned. "Religion lasts longer than truth." Nemo stood stiffly, pupils empty, lips still. But his shadow on the plate moved. I saw it before it happened. The shadow raised its finger, slowly, gracefully. And the air pointer nodded.

"He blesses us," breathed Knife-Neck. "He obeys himself," I growled. "He obeys no one," laughed Ned, "except the beat we give him." And he stamped: short—long—short. The chorus answered in the floor, softly but dirty. The record hummed back 3–2–3, insulted. Two systems, two beats, two mouths. The whiskey in the bottle swayed, forming a mirror image in the throat. And this reflection didn't do what it was supposed to. It didn't slide along, it didn't flow down. It rose**upwards**, against the incline, as if gravity had heard a joke. It stopped, right on the long stroke, as if it wanted to show us: This is what power looks like.

"Oath," Ned crooned. "Atonement," Nemo growled. "Medicine," Conseil snarled. I remained silent, because down here, words are merely taxes. The reflection remained, a shimmering scar of glass that belonged to the boat, not to us. And we stood there, knees full of anger and tongues full of lies, while the whiskey itself decided which beat to serve.

The bottle didn't stop. It became the judge, and we were the accused with too little breath. Conseil took the last drop in the cup, thin as an excuse, and dripped it onto the strap on the air lever. "Leather eats everything," he muttered, "even truth." And the damned thing pulled away.**himself**A crunching thud, as if it had decided to tighten without anyone pulling. Men stared, shoulders heavy, knees weak. Ned grinned. "He's drinking with us," he whispered, "the boat is thirsty."

The record played its liturgy: 3-2-3, 3-2-3, and yet a second pulse vibrated in the room, short—long—short, the counter-beat that bit into our bones. Messerhals laughed, a short cough, "We are two choirs," he said, "we'll be louder than he is." Nemo didn't even raise his head, but air pulled us half a tooth closer, work weighed like iron in our shins. "Atonement," he said. Not a sentence. Just the word, and the room felt smaller.

The chronometer on the wall made a cowardly jump: a second was missing, simply swallowed. Clack——clack. I swore I heard it, the gap, a stuttering of time. The coin in the glass vibrated along with it, turning a quarter, as if to say, "I ate the second." No one moved. No one wanted to touch the boat's property.

Conseil drew new lines on the cup with chalk, thin, crooked, trembling. "Three more drops, then nothing more." Ned laughed, "nothing more is everything." Messerhals nodded, Kirche whimpered, the screw-believer prayed into a wrench. I stood there and smelled spirit, ozone, blood, and I knew: We are no longer crew. We are inventory, and the bottle writes our inventory book.

The bottle was empty. No comfort, no God, only shards and a sticky neck. Conseil placed it on the table, carefully, like a corpse that's not yet allowed to be dropped. Ned grinned, his eyes red and hungry. "Oath fulfilled," he crooned, "now breath and work are ours." His three dogs nodded, a toothy yes in their knees. Nemo didn't raise his fingers, but the plate did it for him: air pinched, work pressed down, light remained the judge. "Separate," he said. Nothing more. Just this one noun, like a guillotine in space.

"Too late," spat Ned, "we've already sworn." Knife-neck beat his chest, Kirche whispered "Light," the screw-believer remained silent as a broken bolt. Conseil lifted the strap, showing it to us like a chain. "Not today," he said. His chalk wrote*END*on the mat, the letters crooked, askew, but honest. I stood between them, feeling anger and fear tearing at my chest like two currents. The chronometer on the wall swallowed another second,*click— —click*, and the coin in the glass spun as if it had understood the joke.

"Down tomorrow," whispered Ned, "tomorrow the lock is ours." Nemo didn't answer, his shadow did: a finger lifted, air became knife, work became anvil. "Order," came from his mouth, but I swear it wasn't him. It was the boat speaking through him. The crew pulled their knees tighter, slogans were stifled, numbers remained. Conseil gathered the shards, arranged them into a map, a small geometry of glass that belonged only to him. I knew he was keeping it like a testament to "Escape from Hell."

And then the world mocked us, as it always does. The shards arranged themselves, one point next to the other, into a crown of glass. 3-2-3, neat, mocking, exactly in time. We stared, no one spoke. The clock ticked twice, as if to mock us:*click–click*in one breath. The record nodded—yes and no at the same time. Key beat and counter beat in one fell swoop. I felt my throat burning, not from the whiskey, but from the truth: We had long since become mere extras in a play written by the boat. And the last bottle was merely the curtain that had fallen.

Escape from Hell

A plan is only a plan when it feels like a knife. Not like a map. Not like hope. A thing that cuts. Conseil had the chalk in his fist before the men understood that we can't win anything in "today," so we have to wrest it from "now." Yellow judgment upon us, finding everyone guilty; ozone film on our tongues; spirit sits in the seams of the canvas like a harbor curse that never finds its way home. The battery hums, insulted. The fuse box growls. Wedge creaks beneath the bulkhead as if wood were praying. The plate does its 3-2-3, obedient as a dog that only pretends it has no teeth.

"Cut," said Conseil, and the floor developed lines that looked like scars in a boxer's skin. He drew the first one from the desk toward the box wall, diagonally, because straight lines lie down here. "Lockspur misplaced—"*A*." The second line bent past the plate, right up to the lock, but stopped an inch before it: "Lock –*B*." Then he wrote at length across our small battlefield, from the choir's toes to under the lamp: "Long = push." His voice was hard, short, honest; the tone of people who no longer know songs, only instructions that don't kill if you follow them.

Ned stepped to the edge of the lines and immediately translated the mathematics into noise. "Chorus, hear:*A*is canvas & spirit – cold, no fire – away from the desk, away from the lever.*B*is belt, knot, hands off.*Long*is called steam burst when/Stamp." He didn't turn his head; his words bounced off the men's boots until they seeped into their knees. Short—long—short. The secret beat was already running. Messerhals teetered, that vanity on two legs; Kirche stared at the lamp again, as if a light could love decisions; the two undecided men looked for the smallest lie that could still be believed. The screw believer was already standing by the wedge, the red map of his hand placed against the seam: "I'll hold until it costs me." "It'll cost you everything," I grumbled. He nodded, as if we agreed.

Nemo stood at the slab, making a rope out of air. Not a finger on metal, yet his shadow seemed like a conductor drumming without lifting his sticks. "Order," he said, and air pinched half a tooth, work pressed a touch heavier into the shins; the yellow court grinned. Slogans withered, numbers survived. His word was just a noun, a pole in the throat. Nevertheless, we obeyed, because down here, millimeters bite better than knives.

"Line up," Conseil growled. "Screw the wedge—you." The red arm rose. "Knife neck on the secondary valve. Not open until*Shock*. Only touch if*Number*commands you." Messerhals grinned and nodded as if he had skipped

the school of reason and still passed. "Church – you make the trail: cloth with spirit,*cold*, no torch. I repeat, no*cursed*Torch." Kirche nodded twice too quickly, as if to demonstrate that an addiction can also be fed with consent. "Narrator – with me. We double the belt. Flatten the knot, back. If his shadow plays with the sliders again, he'll break his teeth on leather." "Leather has no teeth," I grumbled. "Today, it does," said Conseil.

Ned gave the choir his vowels:*A*on the short left,*B*on the short right,*Long*on the long pitch. His boots called it out, quietly, cheekily. Three men answered and hated each other for it, because it sounded good. "No one shouts. Whoever shouts pays for air," hissed Conseil. "Anyone who stumbles stays outside. Anyone who stands firm dies as furniture." He drew the second chalk line thicker, took the belt from his hip, and wrapped it around the strut on the desk: once around, back, flat, through—the honest knot that had already said "no" yesterday when Ned wanted to play "yes."

"Lockspur," he ordered, and Kirche stepped into the front line. He dipped the canvas into the tin cup; the spirit smelled of harbor, of a pharmacy lie, of a hungover mass. "Just a drop," said Conseil, "no river. We'll draw his nose away from the desk." "His?" I asked. "The boat," he replied, "or his back. Or our next stupidity. I don't care, as long as he's away." The screw-believer held the harpoon pole to the track, not as a weapon—as a grounding device, in case any spark should get the idea to make a scene.

Nemo gave us nothing but his noun. "Separate." Air still pulled a hair. Work remained difficult. I hated how well he could sort us out with one word. Ned grinned narrowly and turned the "separation" into an invitation. "A, go—gentle. B, ready—check belt. Long—"*later*." The choir responded in their feet. I felt the ground itself lick the beat, as if it wanted to retain it.

Conseil calculated the pressure windows aloud: “Stroke in the long stroke, when wedge*mm*never mind*kkr*; at*mm*We're in the soft window, a side branch just a breath, a water band on the ceiling—don't open your throat. Pump connected, but not drunk: half rhythm, no heroic pressure." He scribbled numbers on the margin: +1/2 air = -1/4 thrust; +1/4 work = -1/8 air loss;*Long*= Impact window. His chalk scratched, and I felt my breath voluntarily settle into those small cracks, simply because they lie more clearly than words.

"When his shadow shows," I said, "the belt jumps." "The belt doesn't jump," murmured Conseil, "the belt holds. We jump." Ned pushed the bottle out of my head by laughing softly. "Today we pray with cloth," he whispered. "No more torches." "Torches are priests," I said. "We're just peasants." "Peasants win

wars," he grinned. "Peasants get burned," I corrected. "Then steal wood," he said, and his heel made a*short—long—short*like a signature.

Church laid the trail: a wet streak across the first line, gently, drops spaced a curse apart. The smell clung to his tongue like an old harbor breeze. The harpoon scraped alongside, metal against metal, wary of a dull current. Messerhals felt the secondary valve with his fingertips, searching for the cold. "Don't turn it," Conseil warned. "I'm just stirring up our misfortune," the dog grinned.

"Count," said Nemo. That's all. The room did it.*One two three.*Keil made his*mm*, happy as an old joint that can do it again. The battery rumbled deep bass. The box grumbled fistula. The lamp above us was cold, like a reprimand that no one wants to hear anymore. I stood by the strap, my hand on the leather, feeling the knots flex their small, proud muscles. The boat listened. It hears*always*to.

Ned kept the chorus short: “A*now*… stop. B*now*… wait. Long …*later*." The ground trembled with steps wiser than the mouths from which they came. The two undecideds rhythmically found an opinion; good enough not to die in the way. Knife-neck's cheekbones grinned themselves, without a face; Kirche hummed "he—," bit it off because numbers fill the mouth. The screw-believer murmured screw sizes like rosary beads.

Then Conseil knelt down and drew the final line of the plan on the glass itself: a thin, bold chalk line on the inside edge of the window, representing the steam jet*think*before it happened. "Here," he said to the boat, "not there." I thought it was ridiculous and believed it immediately, because ridiculous things down here are often the last ones still working.

"Again," grumbled Nemo – and his shadow twitched comically, as if he had decided to help us by looking away. The record remained in 3-2-3, but I heard this little, sadistic*hnn*between the blows, which always comes when the boat plays instead of just serving. The air remained taut, the work remained a burden. Time ticked cowardly. Chronometer:*click—click—click.*No Ferranz. No jump. Just honesty in lying.

"On signal," whispered Ned. "Lang comes when Keil sings. Not before." "Keil doesn't sing," corrected the screw-believer. "Keil hums." "Then we dance to the hum," said Ned. I hated that I was already dancing.

And just then, the world delivered its small, polite insult—as a signature to our knife plan. On the glass, just above Conseil's chalk, the condensation began to

drift. Not down, not as a lazy drop. It settled as a fine, bright line.*before*the line, exactly one inch*in advance*A second breath of condensation followed, exactly on the next breath, timed 3-2-3 – short—short—long – as if the disc itself were practicing the plan of advance. A ghost copy, clean, bold, consistently*before*It ran after us as if the boat already knew where we were about to go wrong. It lasted three beats, then it was gone, without falling, without melting. Ned smiled like a man receiving a letter from the enemy and recognizing his own handwriting in it. Conseil simply said, "I've seen it." Nemo didn't look. The plate purred. And our knife plan suddenly felt as if the blade had already tasted blood.

The church staggered along the chalk line, the canvas dripping spirit like a crooked confession. The smell gnawed at their noses, harbor and pharmacy rolled into one, salty, bitter, nauseatingly familiar. Ned grinned, stamped his shoes: short—long—short. The choir took it up, two men hesitant, one willing. Knifeneck bobbed, licked his lip. "A," Ned whispered, and the canvas made its mark—cold, no fire, just this wet snake across the floor. The screwbeliever held the harpoon pole close beside it, grounding against stupidity. I stood by the strap, hands on the leather, and felt every breath tug against the knots.

Conseil knelt, counting millimeters as if reading the seconds to a dying clock. "Three more drops, then stop. Two more lines, then cut. One more, then push." He drew tiny chalk crosses on the edge, numbers only he could read. Nemo stood like a monument, murmuring, "Separate." The slab squeezed air tighter, making work fall heavier on his feet. The men groaned, but they continued dancing, slogans in the dust. Ned held his arms wide as if he were the priest at a mass no one had ordered.

The smoke began—spirit vapor from the canvas, thin, gray, too weak for fire, too strong for lies. It didn't rise; it crept sideways, horizontally, a line in the yellow. Against the draft, against all laws, it held fast in the air for three beats, like a wire. Short—short—long, it pulsed, bold, impudent, exactly in time. Then it didn't fray; it simply dissolved backward, as if the wall had sucked it in. The men saw it, no one spoke. Ned grinned, Conseil cursed softly, Nemo didn't blink. I breathed, and even my breath felt as if it wanted to choose its direction.

The strap tightened around the air lever like an angry dog. Conseil doubled the loop, flattened it, and pulled it back, then tied the knot so that the leather had more willpower than any person in the room. "No one can catch it unless the numbers say so," he growled, chalk still between his fingers. I put my hand to it, felt the leather already breathing on its own. Ned grinned, stamped short—

long—short. His chorus took it up, their soles like hammers in the dust. "B," he whispered, "B for liberation."

Nemo stood still, flesh motionless, eyes like empty measuring instruments. But his shadow twitched. Fingers lifted the plate, and the air indicator obeyed like a dog on command. Millimeters tighter, our throats grinding. Conseil yanked on the strap—the knot tightened as if it had its own muscles. "Not with us," he hissed, and the leather stretched sideways, blocking the lever more firmly. Men stared, knees weak, words dead. Ned laughed softly. "Even leather rebels," he said, "even a dead animal knows whom it will serve."

I sweated into the mat, tasting the salt and spirit. The screw-believer placed his red hand on the knot, testing whether duty could dwell in leather. Messerhals cursed, Kirche giggled, the two undecided men rubbed their soles raw in counter-beat. Nemo muttered, "Order." The boat didn't obey him. It obeyed the shadow and the knot.

And then the small miracle happened, which was worse than any threat: The knot slipped half an inch sideways. Not because anyone was pulling. Not because leather is willing. It moved audibly, a dry*krpp*, and blocked better, more firmly, as if he had decided who he was going with. For three beats, he pulsed in a 3-2-3 pattern. We stared, no one spoke. I wanted to laugh, I wanted to cry. Ned grinned, Conseil just said, "Hold." Nemo was silent, his shadow was silent. But the boat laughed through the sliders.

The wedge groaned as Conseil fed it numbers. “Window at*mm*, not at*kkr*" ," he murmured, chalking the seam, marks like scars the wall would retain. The screw-believer pressed his red stump against it, quietly, stoically, as if he could massage duty into wood. Knifeneck stood at the secondary valve, fingers greedy, lips full of bets. "Not yet," I growled. "Not until the wedge sings." "Wedges don't sing," he grinned. "Today, already," Conseil snipped.

Kirche continued the trail, alcohol dripping in tiny serpentine lines that made the room stink of harbor. "Long," Ned rehearsed, and the men stamped short—long—short, the floor vibrated, slogans in the dust. Nemo whispered, "Order." The plate pinched air tighter, work pressed deeper, light remained the yellow court. We bent over, because millimeters weigh more heavily than pride.

Then came the push from the adjacent branch. A harsh hiss, a short bark, and the ribbon of water leaped along the ceiling. Not down, not nicely. Up, across, like a snake that wants the wrong thing. Conseil grinned coldly: "Exactly as expected." We lay down under the mats, grabbed the handrails, breath short,

counted. Ned whispered "right away," and his dogs nodded as if they'd invented the word. Nemo stood rigid, his shadow raised fingers, the record hummed.

And in the middle of the hiss, something impossible stopped: three drops broke free from the band, hanging horizontally, as if nailed to the air. They pulsed 3-2-3, boldly, precisely, as if they were our lungs being tested. They stood there for three beats, then they dissolved not downward, but backward—disappearing against the current, as if the depths had called them back. We stared, the way children stare when physics gives them the middle finger.

The burst of the secondary valve shook the entire belly of the Nautilus. Steam and water mingled in a piercing hiss that sounded like laughter when you've lived underwater too long. The battery barked, the fuse box whirred, the wedge vibrated under the red hand of the screw-believer. "Now," gasped Conseil, "open the window." Ned stamped immediately, short—long—short, Chor followed. His soles pounded the floor, a prayer in the dirt. Knifeneck tore at the valve, wet with sweat, and the boat groaned. Kirche half-screamed "Light" before the air stole it from him.

Nemo stood there, his gaze blank, his pupils black holes without stars. But his shadow did it for him: finger raised, Schieber nodded. The plate jumped as if on an invisible leash. Air nearly squeezed our brains out of our noses, work pounded our bones like an anvil. "Atonement," Nemo murmured, but it was the boat that spoke. Conseil tugged at the strap, leather creaked, held, jammed. We all squatted half in the dust, half in time, breathing on credit.

And then the ugliest spell happened: The chronometer on the wall froze. The second hand stopped mid-stride, for two full beats. Time itself paused, like an executioner reconsidering whether to strike. At the same time, the sliders jumped to 2-3-2, wild, wrong, deadly—and tipped over.*himself*Back in 3-2-3, neat, sneering, as if the boat had decided to tell us a joke. Ned laughed darkly. Conseil cursed. I swore I heard the coin clack in the glass, as if it had applauded. Nemo said nothing. He didn't need to. The boat spoke for him.

The boat yanked us up like an animal tired of its chain. A jolt through the stomach, metal groaned, mats slipped, the handles squeaked in sweaty hands. Steam bit our faces, hot, wet, nauseatingly honest. We staggered, not like heroes, but like furniture that had been misplaced. Ned shouted "Long!", stamped short—long—short, and the dogs answered with their feet. The chorus vibrated in our bones, more threat than hope.

Conseil lay half-lying on the slab, hands on the belt, leather roaring back, keeping the shadow finger at bay. Knifeneck roared, at the valve, sweating, blood in his mouth. Kirche whined, clinging to the cloth, the stench of alcohol stinging his throat. The screw-believer grumbled against the wedge, his red hand clinging to the metal, duty pressed into his tendons. Nemo stared through us, a hollow prophet, and his shadow raised fingers again, but this time he stumbled. Three hands twitched, then froze.

We slammed into the upwelling, chests against pressure, heads against the wall. I heard the Nautilus itself gulping at the air, panting as if it thirsted for our breath. Bones rattled in counter-beat, sweat dripped, salt water bit. "Hold!" Conseil yelled, his voice like chalk on glass. Ned laughed, a ragged "yes" that tasted like a threat. We slid on, up, sideways, anywhere—just away from that tin belly.

And then the impossible: The coin in the glass didn't do what coins do. It didn't fall. It didn't stay. It rose slowly, inch by inch, like an old diver refusing to drown. It traveled upwards an inch wide, glittering in the yellow dish, pulsing in a 3-2-3 pattern as if it no longer belonged to us. We stared, we gasped, we climbed, and the coin laughed silently, because it was the only one who knew that ascending down here is just another kind of drowning.

The shock subsided like a bad joke told too long. We hung panting from the handholds, lungs in the air, knees weak, tongues salty. The mats were slippery with our own sweat, the walls dripped as if the Nautilus itself had been sweating along with it. The battery purred in a hangover, the fuse box muttered in a huff, the wedge creaked. The yellow judgment hung over us, merciless, and everyone knew: We hadn't escaped, we had merely shifted.

Conseil swiped chalk across the mat, writing the number of survivors as if it were a bill to be handed over to the harbormaster. Knifeneck licked the last drop of anger from his lip, grinning crookedly. Kirche crouched, whispering "Light," but more quietly, as if he'd understood that God never sends a lightbulb down here. The screw-believer held up his red stump like a blunt seal: duty fulfilled, but not paid. Ned grinned, stamped gently, short—long—short, his chorus answering in the dust. "Down tomorrow," he whispered, "lock tomorrow."

Nemo stood as always, only his lips moving. "Separate," he breathed, and the boat nodded to him, its valves purring in a three-two-three. His shadow raised its fingers, obeying itself. We were extras in a sermon we never ordered. I felt

my chest, felt how breath was still the rudder. Escape hadn't set us free; it had only given us a new cage.

And then the world mocked again. The record struck twice in one breath: a "yes" in the metal, a "no" from the wall. Basic beat and counterbeat simultaneously, short—short—long and short—long—short, one above the other, like two voices in one throat. The chronometer ticked twice.*click-click*, a mockery. The coin in the glass vibrated, grinning silently. We stared, no one spoke. And I knew: We hadn't left hell. We had merely crossed the hall.

Back to a world that is no better

The skin of the sea lay over us like a second blanket of bad mood. No sky, no promise—just a scarred mirror that reflects the light wrongly with every movement. White from above, but not friendly; it came down like an interrogation that had long since decided what you would have admitted. The belly of the Nautilus acted as if it could calculate everything away with perfect tact: 3-2-3, 3-2-3, as good as a dog in its regalia. Battery purred in its hangover, fuse box grumbled like a tin can full of teeth, Keil crunched, offended, but still there. The yellow judgment of the lamp remained, even though everything above was pale and supposedly honest—a double chin of lies that you'll never get rid of.

"Order," said Nemo, and the word made millimeters out of throats. Air pinched half a tooth, work pressed a grain of sand heavier; light remained Richter, only flattened in white. He stood at the plate as always, fingers not on it, only above it, that fine distance where men believe they are gods. His shadow on the sliders was narrower than below, but meaner; he had learned to pretend he was innocent in the lighter gray. "Separate," Nemo added, and the Nautilus obeyed not us, not him, but the noun in the room. I hated how few words are needed to direct bones when metal is reading along.

Conseil had already taken out the chalk before any of us could properly see the white. A line on the floor from the desk to the viewing window: "Sichtschlitz" (viewing slit), he called it, because "periscope" would be just a play here. A second line, across, just in front of the upper flap: "Breathing window." He wrote the pay times, small, scratchy, definitive: 6—9—12 strokes; more is a luxury we don't get. Next to it, in square teeth:**filter**He pointed to the canvas, which smelled of alcohol and hospital. "Wet and clean over it. No spark. Zero

heroism. If you cough, you cough in numbers." He looked at me as if he needed an echo. "3-2-3," I said, and it tasted like a coin.

Ned stood to the side of the window, his nose almost in the glass, as if he were about to search the light's pockets. His chin had that harbor frown that says: I'm about to steal the day's shoes. "Do you smell it?" he whispered. "Wind." I smelled only oil, algae, rusty wanderlust. And yet, yes: there was a sound from outside that didn't taste like us. A distant whup—whup of winds, metal on metal, the whir of a drum somewhere—a deck netting or patrolling; the same, both make people into fish. Knifeneck stood two steps behind him, bobbing, his lip again a red flag. Kirche stared at the brightness, as if the spotlight up there could put the yellow down here on trial. The screw-believer had laid his red map against the wedge, as if duty could calm wood. The two undecided men clung to the grid the way men cling to prayer when numbers are no longer enough.

"Open the viewing slit at 6," Conseil ordered. "Then three strokes, then back down. No stunts. Breathing window only afterward. Canvas in front, dripping with spirit, but not swilling. I want the wind, not the fire." He knelt, wrapped the filter around the valve's mouth, tightened the straps, pulled the knot flat and back—his honest handwriting on leather and dirt. "Double belt?" I asked. "Double," he nodded, and looped it—our trusty, mean belt—once around the strut, back, flat, through. The knots made their krrp, not like animals, more like tools that had realized they had to play priest today.

Nemo ignored people—he addressed the record. "Order," again, as if it were a formula. Air choked a breath, work made the shins weep briefly, then stopped. Light remained that greasy white that counts your pores. The coin in the glass stuck stubbornly, impudently, as if it had bought a ticket for us up above. The chronometer ticked cowardly, clack—clack—clack, astonishingly accurate for a world so fond of fibbing.

"Check the breathing hole?" I asked. "After the slit," said Conseil. "Once the first lie from above gets through, you'll know what to filter through." Ned grinned. "Maybe the lie up above is at least beautiful." "Beauty is a knife with a mirror," I growled. "You just find bloody faces more appealing."

Conseil's chalk was moving again: three small squares on the edge of the pane, seeing, not seeing, seeing. Below them, lines like breaths, thick and thin, in the pattern that's been ours for weeks. "No one presses their foreheads against the glass," he ordered. "The white is eroding faster than ozone." Messerhals laughed hoarsely. "I just want to see if the world still has shoulders." Kirche

whispered "light," and I patted the back of his finger on the beam—not as a punishment, just as a reminder that down here, bodies are only people when they count numbers.

The Nautilus sensed our formation like an animal lifting its hoof before the blow falls. I felt the vibration in the bulkhead, a polite threat; the boat didn't like the white. It never liked anything that wasn't 3-2-3. "Slit," said Conseil, and Nemo—or his shadow—noded the plate. The crack opened, a finger's width, then two, then three. Cold washed in like a reproach, salt bit noses. We stood and pretended to be mere mechanics. No mothers, no sons, no one who once knew palm trees and now screws. Just breath and millimeters.

What I saw: a gray over a white, a rain of scales from above, a shadow of something that could have been a freighter or a goddamn tin altar. A film of oil drifted like a skin disease that no one treats. I heard voices in the distance, blowing the wind the wrong way: a bark that didn't speak, only commanded; a pipe; metal gnawing at metal. Ned sucked in the air as if he could roll tobacco from the slit of daylight. Knifeneck whispered "land," even though there was none. Church suddenly laughed, small, pitiful, only because the sun somewhere cast reflections that never happen in yellow.

"Three strikes," counted Conseil. "One—two—three. Closed." The slit fell; the world outside went "later" again. "Breathing window," he announced, and we half-folded the canvas, which stank like a port apothecary, over the flap. Spirit dripped at helpful intervals. "Not yet," countered Nemo, and air briefly rose in our throats like a trick, only to immediately narrow again. "Atonement," he murmured. I would have liked to smack the noun out of his hand.

Ned kept his choir small, wise; no roaring, just soles that know how to make the boat believe a lie. Short—long—short as a signal for later, for the crate catch, which we didn't yet know whether it would bring us cigarettes or holes. The screw-believer pressed his red stump harder into the wedge, as if he could use it to send the bill to the sea. The two undecided ones stood behind Conseil's line and looked as if they'd just learned that their names no longer fit home.

And just then, the world twitched like a poorly mounted angel. It wasn't a sound. It was light. Nothing more, nothing less—different. Right at the surface of the water, where our viewing slit had just been playing truth, the surface ticked. I swear: brightness pulsed, not wavelike, but counted. A bright breath, short; a second, short; then a long one, during which even our yellow court forgot to judge for a moment.**3–2–3**, clean, cheeky, as if the sun had eaten a

metronome and was now rehearsing our song. It lasted exactly three cycles, not one more. Then the white acted as if it were just weather again. We looked at each other. Ned grinned, Conseil wrote "seen" in the air, without chalk. Nemo didn't look. But the record purred, contented like a judge who knows the next defendant is already knocking.

The world above had a voice like a rusty choir: winches spitting their ropes onto bare drums; metal scraping against metal; short whistles that explained nothing—just "go" and "stop" and "fuck you" all rolled into one. It sounded as if someone had built a dock into the sky's ribs. A film of oil slid across our viewing slit like a skin disease with an opinion. Clinging between two waves was the silhouette of something large—freighter? fishing boat?—a belly in the water that never fills. We stayed below, just below the world's chin, pretending we belonged in the salt.

"Viewing slit in three," said Conseil. He didn't count with his lips, he counted with his knuckles on the edge.*tak—tak—taaak.*"On—three—close." His tone had the precision of a knife that already knows which flesh to cut. I stood at the belt, leather under my hand, knot flat, back, the honest leash against shadowy hands. Ned clung to the side of the glass, his nose a finger's breadth from the white, that greedy harbor calm about to tip into noise. His knife neck bobbed, his knee a threat, his lip a red flag. Church let the word "light" grow in his mouth like a tumor; I saw it before he said it and pressed the strap into his shoulder, silently, so he could stifle it in his larynx. The screw-believer had his red map wedged against his head, as if he could massage duty into wood. The two undecided ones held on to the grid; their knuckles were chalk.

"Separate," murmured Nemo, and the plate nodded millimeters. Air a touch closer, work a grain of sand heavier. The yellow dish remained an offended sun. Nemo's shadow on the sliders was thinner than at night, but he had learned to lie properly in the gray. "No one with their forehead against the glass," said Conseil. "White eats eyes." Knifeneck grinned. "Then it'll eat me first." "It eats stupidity in one bite," I retorted. His grin remained, but his forehead remained. At least for once, reason gained an inch.

"Open," said Conseil. The slit lifted, carefully, one finger—two—three. The whiteness came in like a cold judge. No warmth, only brightness that writes debts. I saw nets dragging just beneath the skin, lead eyes like teeth, snapping at anything that breathes. A spotlight slanted through the water, a slicing sword of light that loved its own edges. He searched. He cut. He made no secret of the fact that if he found us, we would be his.

Ned sucked in air as if he could smoke wind. "There," he whispered, "do you hear it? The winches are going backward. The drum is moving too close. Catch boat." "Or patrol," grumbled the screw-believer. "Patrol has rules." "Catch boats are hungry." "Hunger often wins." We kept our mouths small so that air would last in centimeters. The plate made her*3–2–3*, good, hostile, the same old "yes, but." Nemo wasn't looking at us; he was looking at the room as if he had nailed the word "atonement" to the air.

The spotlight swept over our slit. The water in front of us turned milky, sharp, a cone that sorts everything but you. "Close," said Conseil. The slit fell. We remained dark yellow, offended. "One more time," begged Ned. "Later," Conseil cut. "I need a breath first." He pointed at the screen—filter over the top flap, dripping spirit, no flame—and we nodded, because words were precious. Kirche nodded too quickly, as if he already knew where he was sinning again.

A dull*whoop—whoop*approached, heavy, slow. A second cone swung in a shallow curve. "Slit in*two*", said Conseil. "Breathe*short—short—long*in between." He pointed with his fingers, the numbers suffocate when they become words. Nemo said "order"—just that one noun that turns air into a tax. We paid. Chalk cracked under boots; the choir didn't stamp—it waited. Ned whispered into the bones*short—long—short*; Counter-tact as sin, so quiet that only guilt hears it.

"Up," Conseil said again. The slot opened. This time we were almost*in the*Cone. It brushed the skin over us, brushed the edge of our window. The shadow from the great belly above—freighter, I say—slid by like a dark pulpit on wheels. Nets didn't touch us; they flowed ten inches over, teeth that didn't bite—not yet. Knife-Neck giggled, short, disgusting. "I'll piss in the light's shirt." "You'll piss in your lungs, at most," I said. "Shut up," Conseil counted: "One—two—three." The slit fell; we were nobody again.

And then came the kind of visitor that tacks the world into our skulls. The spotlight swung again, closer, deeper. You didn't see it directly; you saw what it did to the water: a polished swathe in the dirt, a comb separating oil. The cone brushed our glass—no, not*grazed*: He*bog*himself. Not outside. Inside. A thin line of light moved along the inner edge of the pane, clean as chalk, but without dust. It didn't burn. It didn't blind. It wrote.

"Do you see that?" whispered the screw-believer, his voice dry. "Shut up," said Messerhals reverently. The line drew a curve, then another, precise, bold. No trembling. No flickering. The room fell silent, even the record held its breath for a millimeter. I swear on all the dirty puddles: The light line painted 2-3-2.

Short—long—short. In time. In time*Against*-Beat. It didn't run, it lay—and we read it like a wound. Three sequences, perfect. No burning, no glare, just lines that acted as if they'd always belonged there. Then it wasn't over. It was gone. As if the glass had drunk it.

Conseil stood there with his chalk half-raised, stupid and correct, as if he wanted to redraw the line of light after it had already disappeared. "Seen," he said needlessly. Ned laughed briefly, evilly, quietly. "Even the light is making slogans now." Nemo didn't blink. "Separate," he said, as if lines had no opinion. The plate responded with a satisfied*hnn*between two blows. Church's eyes were wide as glass; he whispered "light" like a man who finally knows the name of his addiction. "Close your eye slit," Conseil decided. "Breathing window*even*." The slit fell; the white was back out where it belonged, into its own lie.

We slid the screen over the hatch, spirit dripped quietly, the filter hung damp like a wet sermon. The room smelled of a harbor pharmacy, of rum that no one has, of a hospital that never gets clean. "Three breaths," said Conseil. "Then close again. Nemo—" "All right," Nemo snapped. The air mercifully turned*a touch*up, enough to make you believe grace is a system. Work remained hard. The strap on the air lever tightened, knots growled. Ned stamped in the shadows*short—long—short*I felt the boat listening. It always listens.

Outside, a buoy flew by, red as an old no. Up above, someone was yelling, words in the wind that turned to prunes on the glass. I thought of land, of a quay that eats men who think they're stubborn. I thought of cigarettes we were about to steal so our breath would taste of something. I thought of everything that lies up here as much as it does down below. And I thought of the line of light on our window, which had written Gegentakt without asking us. It was as if the world had smiled back at us. Not kindly. Just honestly.

Impossible detail: The spotlight cone, which we only saw as external, bent inside the glass into a hairline, drawing three clean sequences 2-3-2—without blinding us, without heat—and disappeared as if the boat had absorbed it into the beat.

Taking a breath without prayer means stealing air from the world without telling it you're still alive. Conseil tied the canvas over the top flap, wet as a guilty conscience, spirit dripping at regular intervals, a cold plague we voluntarily took on our tongues. His knot lay flat and back, no decoration, harbor mathematics for throats. "Filter in place," he said, and his breath smelled of numbers. "Three strokes open, three strokes halfway, three strokes

closed. Anyone who wants anything after that can take it from their liver." He looked at everyone as if every face were an outlet. No one acted like a saint.

The strap on the air lever was double, neat as a handwritten mistrust. I held it in my hand like a leash on a dog with its teeth already in its throat. Leder responded with a dry*krrp*That sounded like "I." Ned stood to the side, his forehead barely touching the glass, and had that thin grin that always means: we're about to bend a law by an inch. Messerhals rocked on his knees; Kirche whispered "light" and bit his tongue as if he had my hand in his throat. The screw-believer pressed the red map to the wedge, as if duty could calm wood. The two undecideds stood behind Conseil's line and became so quiet that they were allowed to pass as furniture.

"All right," said Nemo, and the plate nodded with the air. Half a tooth closed, work a touch harder. The white from above remained a judge without humor. Nemo's shadow on the sliders—thin, mean—moved gently, as if testing whether leather would be good today. I pulled the line, knots sang softly.*krrp—krrp*, that indecent music when things decide for themselves. "Separate," Nemo added, and I swore the Nautilus was as happy about the noun as a coin in the offering box.

"Count," Conseil growled. "Six—nine—twelve strokes since Schlitz." He ran the chalk across the mat, small teeth that split air into pieces a man can handle when he's eating his honor. "Breathing window*now*." He pulled the flap lever, no more than an inch, and the canvas breathed like skin. Cold air crept through the spirit and fabric, entering the room like an apologetic widow. She smelled of oil and seagulls and a city that eats its children. We stood there with throats like bottlenecks, cautious, greedy, ashamed, alive.

Ned turned his chin, a little port sign:*later*; his choir—Knifeneck, Church, one of the undecided—still pressed their heels slightly. Short—long—short, very quietly, only for bones. "No kick when air counts," Conseil snarled, without looking. "He who stamps, pays." "Everything pays," Ned grinned, but he kept his heels still. I could feel how the Nautilus liked the silence. Boats love people who breathe without making noise; they can count them better.

The filter seeped into our bad breath like a cheap confession. Spirits burned cleanly but gently. It was as if the world had placed a hand over our snouts and said:*Okay, but only briefly*The room became less yellow and more gray, and that alone made men sentimental. Messerhals grinned with teeth that looked like screw heads. Kirche let out a small, ugly laugh that tried to be a cough. The

screw believer counted in screw sizes: "Sixes, eights, tens," so quietly that only Duty could hear.

Nemo's shadow twitched again at the slide; the leather vibrated in my hand like an offended string. "Not today," I growled. "Today we breathe against you, not with you." "Breathing is order," said Nemo, his pupils like two nails in a plank door. "Order is theft when a boat speaks it," Ned retorted, far too gentle to bite immediately. Conseil pulled the valve open further for the second bar, barely, two fingers. The filter gurgled, spirit dripped in small promises. Air passed through, not much, enough to make sentences risky again.

"Three," said Conseil. "Half." He left the lever halfway open. The screen twitched, sucked, swallowed. I could hear something outside*not*liked, a dull*whoop*In the distance, winds tooted as if they were drawing in souls. A spotlight swept across the water somewhere, making its embarrassing, white logic. The filter held. I wanted to kiss him, just to know if loyalty had taste. Nemo stared right through me as if he had hung "atonement" somewhere in my ribcage.

"Three more," Conseil ordered. "Close." He pulled the lid shut, leaving a gap like the mouth of a man about to say no. "No more than twelve blows in a row. After that, people become stupid because they think they have a future." "I only need one," said Messerhals. "You need a grave that likes you," I growled. Kirche whispered "light" again, but more quietly, as if he had learned that down here, God only appears in numbers.

The chronometer ticked*honest*, what I can least stand if I want to live.*click—click—click*The coin in the glass remained stubborn, as if it were a jackhammer on a Sunday. The record struck 3-2-3, good, but you heard this little*hnn*between the strokes, that says:*You opened something that doesn't belong to you.*Ned smiled and let the push-pull pass only in his tongue; he knew the boat had ears in its soles.

Conseil placed his hand on my belt, not as a command, but as a thank you. "Holds," he said. "Still." The belt vibrated as if someone had trapped a mouse in it. I saw Nemo's shadow; he raised a finger again—not much, just enough to leave the idea of commands in the air. The belt answered itself, pulling*krrp*Half a tooth, without using our hands. "Seen," whispered Conseil. "Done," I whispered back. Ned grinned: "Leather with a conscience. Hallelujah."

We were in the middle of this small, dirty miracle of air-stealing when something above changed direction. Winds screamed differently, a

heavy*whoop—whoop*pulled sideways; the headlight beam, which we had just seen as a line, pushed oil aside somewhere else. "Half more," decided Conseil. "Then the end." He lifted. The filter breathed. We breathed with it, narrowly, counted, greedily. Messerhals ran his tongue over his lip once, as if he could taste the wind. Kirche closed his eyes, as if there was finally room inside.

"Closed," said Conseil. "No," said Nemo's shadow with a finger. The air indicator twitched defiantly; the strap growled, but stayed. I pulled harder, the leather stretched like a self-contradictory sentence. "Enough," I snarled. "Order," said Nemo. His noun made the space smaller. Ned raised his chin, that port sign that stands for later. I nodded at him:*Later is a thief who always wins*.

We lowered the flap until the filter was just blinking wetly. Spirit ran down the edge, a narrow, honest stream. The men stood there, pretending they hadn't just put their hands in the pockets of another world. I could feel the wind in my ribs trying to leave us, on principle. The fuse box coughed tin, the battery grumbled in its hangover, the wedge creaked, insulted but loyal. The lamp above us remained a yellow dish for the poor. Outside, a thin wave splashed onto something hard that needed no name. We were back: down.

And then the room got its signature piece, small, bold, precise—exactly the kind that haunts you longer than scars. The flap was open a finger's breadth, just a mouth saying "Maybe." Wind came from the crack. Not as a draft inward. Not as a whisper outward. It pushed sideways out of the opening, a*line*of air, which you could see because it carried salt and spirit vapor. It ran across the filter, a horizontal plume, and stopped—not on the fabric, but in the air. For three heartbeats, it hung as a line, clean, bold,*counted*: short—short—long. Then it rolled quietly back into the crack, as if the flap had drawn it in like a tongue. Not a drop fell. Not a thread broke. Only wind, which decided to test horizontal laws and, in doing so, showed us who owns the breath when we don't deserve it.

The box didn't come as a gift, it came as a temptation. It floated in the oilskin goo, a brown rectangle with rusty staples for corners, barely larger than a child's coffin, bloated but stubborn; every time a narrow wave tried to kiss it, it shrank away, as if it already knew that hands are precious. Winds rumbled above,*whoop—whoop*A deck barked commands into the white, net lead balls chattered somewhere nearby. We lay just below the world's chin, pretending we were just a whim in the salt.

"Crate catcher," said Conseil, his tone a workshop, not an adventure. He drew a narrow ramp with the chalk from the eye slit to the flap line, drawing two teeth

on the edge:*harpoon*/*leash*. Below are numbers: 3 strikes see, 2 strikes grab, 1 back. "No heroism, no pulling against God. If she wants to, she'll come. If not, she'll remain a daughter of the sea." He looked at me: "You lead the pull." I reached for the leash, which ran over a shabby pulley, a dockside trick that always seems too cheap until it saves lives. Leather on skin, hemp on hand—there's nothing more honest than a leash that doesn't lie.

Ned giggled that thin, silly chorus. "If confession is being held upstairs," he said, staring at the box in the oil, "we'll take the collection downstairs." Messerhals stepped up beside him, lips bloody, tongue bold. "I'll take it with my teeth." "You'll probably get a tetanus," I growled. Kirche whispered "light" into his shoulder, because every prey in his head is named after a lamp. The screw-believer removed the harpoon rod from its earthing, placed the red map against the shaft, and dutifully checked the burr on the steel. "A ten-gauge thread would have held better," he muttered, "but we'll take what works."

“Sight slit open in*two*", Conseil determined. His fingers counted on the edge,*tak—tak—taaak*"Breathing window remains closed until the leash is in place. If you cough, you cough into your shirt." Nemo said "Disconnect," and the panel nodded with air—a touch tighter, as if to remind us that every wish costs a toll here. His shadow on the sliders was thin and tired; I saw him raise his fingers before the pointer did, and hated that I couldn't find it again.

The slit lifted. Pure white, cold, unfriendly. The box stood in the oil like a stubborn dog. "Wait for the scenery," whispered Ned, "if the cone goes to the right, we cut in on the left." The spotlight brushed the water for ten yards, drawing a clean ridge in the dirt. "Now," hissed Conseil. I shoved the harpoon rod through the slit, flatter, flatter, so it wouldn't offend the sea's skin. The screw-believer held out—his red stump an honest resistance. Knife-neck guided the line with two fingers as if it were a tongue. Kirche trembled on the rubber mat, silently praying to the lamp god, who was currently sorting other sinners in the cone above.

The tip danced beneath the film of oil, blind but knowing. An inch higher, an inch lower; the shaft sang very softly against the glass. "Yet," murmured Conseil. "Yet." The freighter's belly above gave us cover, a dark shadow in the white, and suddenly the box was close enough to lie. I gave the little push—not a heroic throw, just a*Tick*with the hand, like pushing a dog's muzzle. Steel met wood. A soft*tock*More honest than any oath. The barbs bit into the wet board. "Got you," I coughed. Ned grinned. Knifeneck cheered silently. The screw-believer let his red hand slide a little from the shaft, seeking purchase at the center of gravity.

“Pull the train on*two*", said Conseil. "Don't tear. Pull like debt." I took the line, the hemp, in my fingers, felt the wet weight of the world. The pulley pin creaked. Leather straps on the reel made that nauseatingly soothing*krr—krr*, that is: you're still alive because you're slower than your anger. The box moved. Not much. Enough that the oil released it like a bad thought. "Slowly—" Conseil warned. "—long," Ned grinned, and his heels made*short—long—short*for the bones. The choir remained silent. Reason gained an inch.

A net passed overhead, the lead balls gurgling as if they were laughing. The cone swung further to the left, and we lay in the shadows like thieves under a pulpit. "No higher than slot depth," Conseil growled, "otherwise you'll kiss the priest and he'll kiss you back." I pulled. The box came. The oil filmed furiously, parted. The line vibrated in the*3–2–3*'I swear, she did. Hemp is a good liar and an even better witness. Nemo muttered "atonement" into the mechanism, air drew a breath, work remained, light remained judge. The Nautilus listened, with all its metal.

Messerhals had to boast. "I'll give her the last inch," he snarled, putting two fingers on the leash*before*my hand. "Leave it," I said. "I have feeling in my bones." "I have thirst in my head," he grinned. "Thirst pushes everything." The screw-believer placed his red hand on Messerhals's knuckles. "Duty comes before thirst." "Duty is thirst with a tie," Messerhals spat. "*Let him“*, said Conseil, and there was no more debate.

The box came down to slot depth, the oil sighed, the slot was just a mouth whispering "Hurry up." "Stop," said Conseil. I stopped. We waited for the pass between two white breaths, for the*short—short—long*from the light that had rehearsed our song earlier. The cone went far over, the deck above roared a*Go*I pulled. The box touched the edge. The glass trembled softly, offended yet curious. Hemp complained, Pulley prayed. Church involuntarily let out a "light," so small that only Guilt heard it.

"Another inch," hissed Ned. "Half an inch," corrected Conseil. I gave it half. The box jammed, as everything jams when the world is built exactly the wrong width. The screw-believer shoved his shoulder under the shaft, didn't lift,*wore*just the mistake. Knife Neck finally shut up. Nemo said nothing, his shadow raised*not*the finger—and that was the strangest thing about the entire opera. The record purred 3-2-3, unmoved.

“Back in, give play, tilt, pull,” said Conseil, and I obeyed the port birth assistance: two fingers of leash*after*, one inch*out*, half a*tilt*, then*pull*The knot on the harpoon eyelet made a fair*knrp*"Please, baby," Ned whispered, and I

wanted to slap him for talking to the water like a girl. The box jerked free, the slit swallowed her halfway, scattered over corners and curse words. Another finger, another. I felt her*inside*.

“Close!” shot Conseil, “*now—to*!" The slit fell, we were yellow again, offended, alive. Oil dripped from the edge like guilt. The box lay two-thirds with us, one-third in the skin of the world. "Don't pull," Conseil ordered, "silence first. Listen first." We heard: winding, net, a whistle like a nail. No "here." No "there." The world hadn't noticed us. Or pretended not to.

“Breathing window*not*" said Conseil. "Not while she's half-hanging in there." "She's getting scared," grinned Knife-Neck. "She's been scared ever since she came across wood," I muttered. I placed my hand flat on the box, felt split ends, salt, stories. Ned leaned forward, read the half-torn writing on the board: Cigarettes / Provisions. He smiled so slowly, as if he were walking into a church to buy it. Church chuckled, sounding like a broken chair. The screw-believer breathed through his teeth and said nothing, as always when things happen that are later baptized as lies.

“To my*Three*tip, on*Long*Pull," counted Conseil, his voice like a vice: "One—two—three." We tipped. The box slipped, squirting oil, scraping at the slit, making that ugly, honest music of wood on glass. I pulled, not like a hero, like a thief. The rope taut,*krr*,*krr*The pulley creaked, hemp was a religion. And then this cheeky insult to physics happened, which sobers you up more than any blow.

The box pulled uphill. Not much. Just enough that my brain cursed and my hands obeyed. The angle of the leash was wrong, the direction was against us—and she came.*despite it*As if someone had tilted the ocean, as if white suddenly had a gradient. She climbed the taut rope*upwards*, two inches, three, with a mocking jerk at each*long*of the accursed 3-2-3. We all saw it. Ned grinned, adoring. Conseil just said "seen," but his fingers turned white around the edges. Knifeneck whispered something that sounded like "Amen" and was immediately ashamed of it.

I looked at the knot on the harpoon eyelet, just so my mind could pretend again that the world were made of things. It did what knots shouldn't when no one touches it: It struck itself halfway. A half-strike, neatly applied, without a hand, without a twitch. Hemp lay upon hemp, smoothed itself out, and drew in.*krrp*"Holy shit," I said, and I mean that without God. The box gave way at that moment, slid completely through the slot, fell into our yellow, bold, alive, and got stuck on my shins like a stupid dog. Up above, the world pretended it

hadn't noticed. Down below, it smelled of oil, spirits, and victory, which will be expensive tomorrow.

Impossibility Detail: While the line stood stubbornly at an angle, the box pulled uphill as if the entire ocean were tilted—and the knot on the eyelet made a half turn of its own accord, audibly*krrp*, without a hand.

We had the box half in our stomachs, half in the world, still oil on our knees, when the surface realized it wasn't alone. Not as a "hello." As a threat. Winches howled obliquely, net lead balls chattered closer, the great belly up above—freighter, patrol, whatever—rolled over us like a faceless judge. I felt it first in my gums, then in the steel: the cone was coming back, deeper, more knowing. Conseil raised his hand, not high, just enough to let numbers take precedence over fear. "Stick," he said. Workshop tone, not poetry. "Under the body."

"Atonement," murmured Nemo, and his shadow raised a finger on the plate. No full throttle, no escape—millimeters. Air pinched a hair, work pressed just enough to make knees learn what they're made for. The Nautilus lifted its back, we slid under the freighter's belly until the water above us sounded muffled and closer, like a blanket with bones in it. Wedge creaked, insulted but ready. The screw-believer was already up, red map at the seam, both heels against duty. "Hold," he grumbled. The boat understood him better than any of us.

The box scraped across the slotted frame and was finally right there with us. Conseil put the harpoon line around it like a belt, knots flat, back. "Don't open. Not now," he said, "you'll die later anyway." Knife-neck grinned but remained silent. Kirche whispered "light" into his cheek like a sick wish. Ned leaned forward, chin against the glass, the harbor calm of a thief who already knows where the bag is. "Right away," he crooned. No drama. Just this narrow*even*that costs men.

Net slid. Not over.*To us.*I heard the lead eyes scraping on the bulkhead like teeth,*tok—tok—tok*, a rosy alphabet lesson in panic. The spotlight scraped white into the depths, tearing oil apart like paper. We were stuck to the freighter's hull; I swear, I smelled the diesel in its rust, the years it had been conditioned for hostility. "Separate," Nemo said to the room, and the plate did the opposite: it pulled us one atom closer to the belly above, as if "order" were lying magnetism.

"Viewing slit remains closed," Conseil decided. "Breathing port dead. Anyone who wants to breathe now will do it more quietly than guilt." The filter hung damp, spirit shimmered, but we let the hatch close like the lips of a man

burying his "yes." The leather on the air lever was taut. I held the strap, felt the knots flex their small muscles. Nemo's shadow fingered the slider. The strap growled.*krrp*, without my help. "Not today," I hissed. He stopped.

Above us someone yelled through the white, words like screws:*Go—Stop—Pull—Stop*The drum of the winds ran, impudently, as if it were winding souls. The great belly vibrated; the freighter didn't move far, only meanly. The Nautilus sighed those half-tones that drive you crazy: 3-2-3, and in between this*hnn*, which threatens without being honest. "Atonement," Nemo again, and I hated how cheap the word can sound with the metal.

Ned crawled into my shoulder. "If he moves over, we'll jump out of here. No one will stomp. I say*even*You pull the box." "I'm pulling flotsam from a church," I growled. "That suits you." He grinned. "Anything that steals suits me." Knifeneck licked blood that was long old. Church had folded her hands on the mat, a praying animal that confuses God with rubber. The screw believer pressed the wedge deeper into his idea. "It still holds," he murmured. "If it breaks, it will break in*mm*, not in*kkr*." I didn't know if that should give me hope.

The net now brushed so close to the cargo ship's belly that you could hear the crest. A lead eyelet tapped right above our viewing slit. I no longer counted it as air. I counted it as silence.*One two three.*Conseil lifted the chalk and drew the word "Ruh" in the air, without a glass, without a bottom, just for our eyes. It didn't stick. It was still right, though. Nemo annoyed us with his "separation." The record annoyed us with its obedience.

"Now," Ned suddenly breathed, and it was the quietest "now" that ever commanded movement. He didn't mean the crate; he meant our sinews. We let ourselves be slung under the freighter's hull.*still*closer to the sheet metal above, a breath that smells of intoxication. The Nautilus obeyed us like an animal trying to decide whose throat it will suck first. The net passed by. Lead clattered afterwords. We remained nobody.

Then the rain came. I know how silly that sounds when you're sitting underwater. But it came. Not on my skin, not into the room. Into my ears, through the steel, through everything. A distant patter at first, then the proximity of a world that boasts of its virtues.*Rain*, said my head, although salt water laughed at it. And it made*no*Normal sound. No carpet. No shower. It fell in steps. Three steps. Three. Two. Three. Short—short—long. You could feel the pauses between the steps, as if the entire smooth, ugly surface above us was holding its breath so we could hear it better.

First push:*tak-tak*Like little fists on wood. I automatically held my breath. Everyone held. Second thrust:*tak-tak*Just as short, just as mean. We stopped again. Third thrust:*taaaak*Long, thick, outrageous. I heard the freighter's belly*long*deep within, as if a god were hitting a roof with a pan. Then: silence. No real silence. For three heartbeats, the world was too big a space with too many questions. Our breath caught because the rhythm held our shoulders.

"Counted," whispered Conseil. "Counted," whispered Ned. Nemo said nothing. His shadow raised a finger, and the plate nodded as if*Rain in stages*a command that can be carried out. The belt vibrated in my hand,*krrp*out of habit. Kirche cried half a "light" into his mouth and swallowed it as the second three-pointer rattled onto the steel again:*tak-tak—tak-tak—taaaak*. I felt the Nautilus give a touch in the long stroke—not much, just enough to make you think someone had caressed us.

Above us, the cone continued on, blind as a policeman. The net was pulled away, lead became bored. The freighter's belly bounced in the swell as if it had no idea what was beneath it. "The eye slit stays closed," Conseil decided again, because you say the right things twice when fear still needs a bit of a command. "No one moves the box. No one blinks too loudly." Messerhals blinked deliberately—a harbor joke that even he didn't like. The screw-believer released the wedge in slow motion, a breath,*mm*, not*kkr*He smiled thinly. Duty sometimes has a sense of humor.

"Order," murmured Nemo, just for the sake of politeness. Air turned a hair*on*—yes, on—as if the boat were giving us a lollipop for good gluing. The work remained hard. (Punishment lasts longer.) The yellow of the lamp crept into every thought and made it dirty. The battery rumbled as if it had invented the rain itself. The box hissed an offended syllable.

"Right away," Ned said again, even more quietly. "When the belly goes away, we'll catch our breath and then we'll tear the box open." Conseil nodded, but only because nodding takes less air than disagreeing. His chalk traced*6—9—12*to the mat, as if he had to approve our future in strips. I laid my hand flat on the wood. It vibrated in the*3–2–3*, I swear. Maybe it was my pulse. Maybe the boat. Maybe the world, which has taken to mocking us.

The rain began a third time, in stages—the same three, the same nastiness. And between the stages, it wasn't just the world that held its breath.*We*held. Not because Nemo had said "separate." Not because Conseil was counting. Because something in the sheet metal above us grabbed our throats in a long

beat and gently squeezed, as if we were the beat it needed. After that, it was just water again. Just white. Just our yellow. Just us.

"Seen," said Conseil—the sober amen. Ned grinned; there was wind in his eyes. Nemo wasn't looking. His shadow already had the next finger ready. The strap was taut, knots were proud. The Nautilus remained glued like a thief behind the altar. We waited. For breath. For chest. For the next step, which would count us as if we belonged there.

The belly up there rolled away, an inch, two, as if it had briefly forgotten us, and that's exactly how long courage works down here: as long as you think the judge is yelling at someone else. "Mini sit-down," said Conseil, no romance in his throat, just a workbench. "Breath first. Then the edge of the box.*Short*." His chalk ran across the mat: 6 air strokes, 3 look, close. He pointed the way with two fingers: over the viewing slit as a gap, the flap on the filter –*wet*, no fire—the strap on the air lever remains God's. "He who gawks pays," he added. "He who screams pays double."

Nemo stood, his pupils like two screws that someone had turned too tight. "Okay," he said, and the plate pinched air first*narrower*so that we understand that grace is a lease that metal terminates whenever it wants. Then she gave a whiff. Just a whiff. Just enough so that you can later convince yourself you survived because you were clever – not because a boat had a residual mood. His shadow twitched at the sliders, fingers half-raised; the strap sang its little, indecent*krrp*, which means: “Not today, buddy.”

"On*my*"Long," hissed Ned, and his heels gave bones a lesson: short—long—short. Choir in the dust, more silent than guilt. Knifeneck stood at the edge of the box like a dog smelling the kitchen; Kirche whispered "light" into his own shoulder, as if he wanted to keep it there. The screw-believer held the wedge, red map at the seam, looking into the wood as if duty could count the buoyancy.

"Slit—open," said Conseil. The slit lifted, one finger, two, white came in like a cold accountant. We saw water that knew too much; an oil film that parted in offense; on the horizon, something that looked like a city, if you dip cities in salt and steal their teeth. Towers? Cranes? Smoke? The sky bore a fire that didn't want to be one—a red line beneath a gray sermon. Messerhals breathed "home" without permission. The church laughed, small, disgusting, like a chair breaking. "Close," counted Conseil. The slit fell. We were yellow again.

"Breathing window," he cracked on. Filter over it, spirit dripping, straps taut. I held the strap, and the leather made that honest animal noise when it tightens itself so men don't do anything stupid. Air pushed through the fabric, smelling of oil, seagulls, rotting hemp, and a lie called wind. Ned didn't raise his hand; he let his chin make the signal, that harbor line that reads:*equal, but smart*. I nodded—not to him, to the number.

"Three—two—three," said Conseil. "Open—half—closed." We pulled and released as if we'd practiced it for weeks. We had. Breath was currency, and today we had small change. The box lay between our shins, wood wet, the lettering half-gone: CIGARETTES / PROVIS… The rest a scar. "Don't tear it open," Conseil growled. "Just loosen the edges. Save the paper before it becomes truth." He took the blunt knife hook, the kind you never see in church, and ran it along the ledge, no heroics, just craftsmanship. Wood sighed, as if it had understood that it was allowed to smoke again.

Nemo whispered, "Separate," and I wanted to pry the word right out of his mouth. His fingers remained on the metal like veils. His shadow was the actual hand. The strap hummed, held, tightened, and I felt how the Nautilus liked his no. Boats love no. They'll eat your yes like cake.

"Long," Ned breathed. His heels said it more wisely than his mouth. We lifted the slot again.*a*Fingers, no more, this time saw*too much*The freighter's belly was gone; the cone moved in the distance, a frantic pair of scissors cutting through white stuff. In between, farther out, lay the horizon, a line that knew it owed us nothing. Above the line: a sky burning on one side. No flames. A flush of city skin. Maybe. Maybe war. Maybe just the sun forgetting how to set without complaint. Knifeneck whispered "land," as if the word had given him back a mother. One of the undecideds said "home," so quietly that the air didn't register. I felt the Nautilus devour both syllables.

"Close," Conseil ordered. The slot closed. The filter remained. "Crate edge now," he approved, and his tone was that of an authority stamping a death certificate even though you're still breathing. We lifted the bar, wood creaked, paper smelled of a failed god. Inside were bundles, wrapped in cellophane, wet but not defeated. Cigarettes. Cheap ones. I could hear the calculations men were making in their skulls:*One move = a yes. Two moves = a tomorrow. Three moves = betrayal.*Conseil pushed the bundles onto the mat, making a bed of canvas and numbers: "Dry. Three strokes, open at the top, then cloth over it. No flame. No hero. Whoever ca—" "—just chews the papers," Ned grinned. "I know the song." He was right. He had the tone of a guy who borrows heaven on the back of his tongue.

We raised the ventilation window halfway, the screen sucking in air. Cold air brushed over the packages, which looked like holy images in which no one believes in anything. Kirche raised her hands, not to pray, but to warm herself. "Don't touch," Conseil cut off his fingers – figuratively, with a look. The idiot placed his red stump next to the packages, as if duty were a lamp. Messerhals smiled, that disgusting, beautiful smile that only men can manage when they're about to do something very stupid.

"One," he asked. "Just to check if the world still tastes good." "The world tastes like guilt," I said. "Then it tastes like us," he grinned. Nemo said nothing. His shadow raised a finger, the plate nodded, a breath of air*high*, so minimal, as if the boat had mocked us:*There, a candy*. Work remained tough. Light remained yellow. A merciful inch in the neck turns men into poets. I hate poets.

“See in*three*", counted Conseil. Schlitz lifted. Outside, there was no rescue, just the usual humor – gray skin, a few greasy reflexes, a chatter from above, buoys bobbing like bad jokes. And then she flew. Not big. Not important. Just a gull that looked as if it had eaten too much harbor. She flew flapping through the white, casting a shadow on the water, like any bird that knows it won't live long. We hardly saw her. We saw her*Transcript*.

The shadow fell on our glass. Not clear. A soft outline, the swift anatomy of an animal that weighs almost nothing. It should have moved on, as quickly as seagulls part the dung and the wind. It stayed. It*remained*We closed the slit. The shadow remained. Dark bird laughter on the inner rim, flat, cheeky, without source. It clung to the pane like a label in the wrong store. Knife-neck whispered, "Holy—" Conseil raised his hand: "No." "Seen," he said then, his honest amen. Ned smiled as if the world had given him a receipt. Nemo didn't blink. His shadow raised its finger again, the record nodded, 3-2-3 struck cleanly, insulted.

We left the breathing window*to*The filter hung, wet as guilt. The packets lay on the canvas like cold promises. "Drying in numbers," Conseil ordered. "Each cigarette is a breath. Whoever takes one says the number he steals." "I'll take*two*Numbers," mocked Messerhals. "Then you'll be missing the verb tomorrow," I retorted. Kirche stretched his hands over the paper as if it were a candle. The screw-believer hummed down the screw sizes as if the boat would like that. Maybe it did.

We sank a touch. Not escape. Duty. The white grew thicker, the yellow took over again. The fuse box grumbled, the battery purred its hangover, Keil ground its teeth as if wanting to know if he was still needed tonight. Ned stepped back,

stamped*short—long—short*into the mat, quietly, as if he were teaching the cigarettes a song. Nemo muttered "atonement," meaninglessly and with habit. I thought: We stole air above and guilt below. The course doesn't change. Only the color of the lie.

"Schlag again?" asked Messerhals, greedy for every look that makes the world an excuse. "No," said Conseil. "Today is enough*know that she is there*." He covered the packets like bread. "Tomorrow we'll smoke," grinned Ned. "In a storm," added Kirche, as if he'd found his own title. I held my hand on the strap; the leather vibrated, contented, as if it had done something good today. Perhaps it had.

The seagull's shadow was still stuck to the window. It had become smaller – or my breath had become larger. "Like a tattoo," whispered one of the undecided, "only on glass." "Only in us," I corrected. And that's when the world played its nasty little trick, showing us that it's listening: The shadow twitched in the*3–2–3*. Once briefly, once briefly, once*long*He touched the inside of the glass at*long*, as if he were wiping his beak on it, and remained there long after the seagull had cried somewhere, above a city that no name can save. It was as if the air outside had signed us. We had sat down, and the world had accepted us—but not absolved us.

Inside, it smelled of oil, spirits, and anticipated consolation. The box lay on the mat like a child wrapped in false clothes. Conseil continued cutting the strip, not with greed, just with that workbench patience that keeps men alive when heroism goes awry. Wood gave way, paper breathed. Bundle upon bundle, cellophane with salt rims, gray saints' leaves for sinners without a church. On each package was a promise in cheap print that dissolved before it had even told a lie. "Don't touch," Conseil said, and his tone turned the men's hands back into tools instead of mouths. He placed the packages on the canvas, angled, with chalk space between them—drying grid, 3-2-3 in paper.

Ned leaned over it, the face of that elegant bastard who would rather steal heaven than believe in it. "Cigarettes in a storm," he whispered, as if it were a prayer he'd offer tomorrow. Knife-neck grinned with teeth that looked as if a ruler-snatcher had counted them; his lip still bore its old red. Kirche held his hands just above it, as if warmth came from words. "Just look," I growled. "He who steals pays in thin air." The screw-believer laid his red stump next to the packages, duty as a lantern. "Three strikes open, then cover," Conseil ordered, and lifted the lid exactly the inch that makes men human. Filter over, spirit dripped—clean, cold. The air came in like an apology, tasting of harbor, seagull, rusty Sunday.

Nemo stood at the plate, his pupils tightened by screws. "Separate," he said. That was all he said, just the noun like a post. His shadow fiddled with the sliders, twitched, rehearsed, threatened; the belt made its little*krrp*That means "no," and it was the most beautiful word in the room. I held the line so that "no" would carry weight today. The boat listened. Boats always listen when people try not to be idiots.

Conseil chalked the heads on the edge of the mat: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7. He didn't cross out the dead, he crossed out the living—little boxes where breath could dwell. Next to them, he drew times: 6 / 9 / 12—our meager future in beats. "Pay your life," he murmured, "not your death." I nodded, knowing full well that I would forget it tomorrow, as soon as smoke warmed my ribs. Ned smiled, put his back against the window as if he could touch the wind outside. "We smoke upstairs," he said. "In the storm, not in the yellow." Kirche nodded so vigorously that his throat crunched, a little amen with phlegm.

Some glass clinked in the box, a remnant, a small bottle wrapped in paper, brownish neck, a mouthful of port—cheap, pathetic, honest. Conseil picked it up as if carrying a rat by the tail. "Later," he decided. "No brandy today, no mass. Just breath and numbers." He wrapped the thing up again, ribbon around it, knotted it flat and back. Knifeneck watched like a dog looks at a steak wandering onto the dresser. "Death and cheap whiskey," he whispered, half joke, half prophet. "Tomorrow," Ned promised, puppy-dog eyes in bronze. "When the wind screams."

"Spy slit closed," Conseil decided, letting the white be the world again. The yellow of the lamp reached into every corner, that disgusting janitor sun that always finds you guilty. Wedge creaked in the bulkhead, wood with memory. The fuse box grumbled softly. The battery purred in a huff. The room became smaller, not narrower—smaller; as if someone had ground down the courage by an inch. I felt the men grow quieter near the packages, as if the smell of dry tobacco were finally coaxing their mouths to work:*Wait*.

Nemo remained a statue. Only his shadow lived; he raised his finger, gently, practiced, and I saw how the boat rejoiced because people are so well governed with drawings. "Order," he breathed, and the plate did nothing—or everything. Air remained, work remained, light remained. The belt sang briefly.*krrp*, out of pure solidarity with us. "Tomorrow," Ned said again, to the cigarettes, to himself, to a city we might have seen, perhaps invented. "In a storm." Kirche stroked the air over the paper as if he were rehearsing a flag. I heard the old quay walls laughing in my head when men think smoke will save something.

It was the moment the world regularly mocks us. Without a hand, without a call, without the ugly luxury of drama, the chronometer on the wall clicked, striking two beats at once. Not fast—*double*.*click–click*in one breath, cowardly, clean, insultingly precise. The hands didn't falter; they jumped over a debt mark, as if time had decided not to count everything today. Ned and I looked at each other like thieves who realize the store is listening. "Counted," Conseil said dryly. "Eaten," I said. Nemo said nothing; his shadow just raised a finger again.

Then the pushers moved. Not with the whim of a human, not in the theater of an order. They slid*automatically*, concise, clean, sneering, as if they'd secretly practiced synchronized gymnastics in the officers' mess. Air/Light/Work were exactly 3-2-3 in the next beat, pure order without a priest. The boat placed its signature under our breath. The room shrugged its shoulders, as if shivering from so much obedience. The belt vibrated in approval, a small animal that has learned which hand feeds.

And the coin in the glass—that cheeky, stubborn piece of pawn—turned with an audible*click*No rolling, no pirouette. A quarter turn, decisive, indecent. She followed the pace the pushers dictated: short—short—long—and remained like a yes no one had ordered. "I've seen it," said Conseil, the most sober mass in the world. Messerhals giggled, Kirche whispered "light" reflexively, bit it off. The screw-believer nodded, heavily, as if someone had rearranged the screw sequence in his stomach. Ned raised two fingers, thin as a lie: "Morning."

I breathed. Counted. Took my eyes off the packages so they'd still taste good tomorrow. The room already smelled of a flag—not the kind from the mast, the kind from mouths. A damned, cheap flag that will follow us. The Nautilus purred, contented like a judge who knows defendants never run out. We stood there, with numbers in our pockets and a storm on our tongues. And everything that mattered had its place.*Today.*

imprint

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