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Two days later, Anna was assigned to the barge in diving dress, tending Majorne. She'd gotten this far twice without going down. Still, after days of working indoors or marooned on the West Street Pier, she was grateful just to be on the open water. Sunlight struck Wallabout Bay like the flare of a welding torch as she watched Majorne's bubbles.

"Kerrigan. Wake up!"

It was Katz, idling in the motored dinghy around a corner of the barge. She was needed. The front tender helped her lift the crate containing the weighted parts of her dress onto the dinghy, which yawed under its weight. As Katz motored through ice slurry, he explained that there was a jammed screw—as propellers were known—on the battleship that had recently been floated from Dry Dock 6 to Pier J. Allied ships were unidentified, but Anna knew from her visits to the captain of the Yard's office that this was the USS South Dakota— "Battleship X," as she was called in the newspapers, for security. She'd downed twenty-six Jap planes in the battle of Santa Cruz.

The battleship loomed spectacularly, shrinking everything around her, even the hammerhead crane, to an afterthought. Savino and Grollier were already at the flywheels of an air compressor on the edge of Pier J. Savino still wasn't diving since his air embolism; Grollier, who had already dived that morning, was in partial dress. Anna's job was to inspect the battleship's four propellers, locate the problem, return topside, and explain what needed to be done. Grollier, recently trained as a burner, would go down to make the repair.

"Shouldn't I make the repair if I can?" Anna asked, betraying more eagerness than she'd meant to.

"The only reason you're diving at all is we've no one else," Katz said.

She flushed. "That wasn't my question."

"Just do as you're told."

A stage—a platform lowered by ropes—had been prepared for her descent. As the water closed around her, she rediscovered the sensation of being weightless. She felt the pull of the East River's infamous currents even on the ship's lee side. Down she went through soft fronds of daylight alongside the stupendous hull. Its sheer scale suggested violence. Anna wanted to touch it. Holding a rope of the stage, she swung her body toward the ship's hull and let her gloved hand slide over its outer shell while the stage pulled her down. Her skin prickled into gooseflesh. The ship felt alert, alive. It exuded a hum that traveled through her fingers up her arm: the vibration of thousands of souls teeming within. Like a skyscraper turned on its side.

At last she made out the whorls of the after starboard screw and signaled to Katz that she'd reached it. Descending lines had been hung to help her maneuver, and she used these to float herself toward the screw. It was fifteen feet high, its five blades curved like the inside of a seashell. Anna moved among them, running her gloves along the edges of each blade to the center ring where they met. Nothing fouled them. Taking care not to foul her own lines, she climbed around the screw to the shaft connecting it to the engine. She followed this to the forward starboard screw, which had four blades rather than five. It, too, was clear. Now she gripped the forward edge of the ship's rudder—like the steel door to a bank vault—and used it to pivot around to the port side of the hull, which faced the river. Currents buffeted her, swells of passing boats. On the forward port screw, she found the problem: a rope the width of her arm had snared among the blades. It was being held tight by one of the infamous railroad ties, which dangled several feet below.

A pull from Katz. Anna pulled back. Now she was supposed to return topside so that Grollier could cut through the obstructing rope with his oxy-hydrogen torch. But why should she go back up? Why not saw through the rope by hand, using the hacksaw in her tool bag? Anna made this choice in perfect knowledge that it was the wrong one. Following rules had got her nowhere. Passing tests had got her nowhere. In the course of getting nowhere, she had given up on some larger vision in which being good and trying to please made any sense. Why not take what she could while she had the chance?

She moved around the fouled screw blades, tugging at lengths of rope. The tightest segment was near the center, a figure eight caught between the two most vertical blades. Anna removed her hacksaw on its manila cord and began to saw at this portion of rope. It was slow work.

Katz signaled again, then again. Each time she gave one pull in return—I'm all right—and continued with her work. Katz signaled that he was sending down a slate. Anna repeated the signal but did not go starboard to write on it. As soon as they read her findings, she would be ordered topside, already in trouble. Why not stay down and finish what she'd begun? Like a thief trying to crack a safe before an alarm rang, Anna sawed in the half-dark, possessed by a feral determination she knew was pure selfishness, bound to hurt her in the end. She didn't care. The rope began to strain where she sawed; she felt its tension pass into the dwindling number of intact strands until they quivered like fiddle strings. Then the rope snapped with a twang she could hear over the hiss of her air. Its two ends hung in the murk, hemp threads oscillating like tentacles. Anna climbed over the screw, tugging at other segments of rope, trying to redistribute their slack. The effort made her light-headed. All at once the ropes began to slip, the stanchion's deadweight lulling them gently away from the screw blades. Then all of it fell away, rope frills waving as they fluttered into the dark.

Back on the rising stage, Anna experienced a first pinch of regret. Her modest achievement, easily replicable by Grollier with his torch, shrank beside the enormity of her offense. Even before the stage had reached the pier, she saw the scar burning scarlet on Katz's upper lip. "It's done," she said quickly when he opened her faceplate. "The screw is clear."

"How dare you ignore my orders?" he roared before she could step off the stage.

“It’s done,” she said, swallowing. “The job is done.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are? I sent down a slate and you ignored the slate.”

An animal smell, like ammonia, rose from inside Anna’s dress. She was afraid. “Let me off,” she said.

But Katz seemed out of his right mind. “Wait until I tell the lieutenant, you lousy cunt,” he bawled, jabbing his head at her so she saw gold fillings in his mouth and smelled baloney on his breath. “He’ll give you the bum’s rush so fast you’ll see stars.”

He was going to kill her; she could feel that he wanted to. She leaned backward, clutching the ropes of the stage.

“She’s falling,” someone screamed. “Grab her, grab her!”

The weight of the destabilized dress was too great to arrest; Anna’s left glove lost its grip on the rope, and she toppled like a tree, aware that gravity was pulling her away from her feet but unable to stop her fall. She saw veering sky and must have screamed. Or maybe the screaming was Katz.

Then she hung suspended. Katz had seized her lifeline and stopped her plunge at the last possible instant, before the heels of her boots left the stage. Anna held her body rigid, trying to anchor them in place. If her shoes slid off the edge, the weight of the dress would hurtle her straight to the bottom of the bay—along with Katz, if he didn’t let go. The lifeline was fastened to goosenecks at the back of her helmet and threaded through eyelets at the front of her breastplate. Gingerly, terrified of flipping over, Anna reached up a gloved hand and tried to close her faceplate.

“No. No,” Katz rasped from above her. “Don’t move.”

Hand over hand, with shuddering arms, he began to pull her lifeline toward himself by agonizing degrees, pivoting Anna’s rigid 320-pound bulk toward a vertical position. His face was scored with sweat, his eyes locked to Anna’s, as if the effort were happening there. She concentrated on not bending, an imperative that caused a conflagration of pain in her back. She was afraid of vomiting into the helmet. She longed to close her eyes, but it felt essential to maintain eye contact with Katz. Slowly, gravity began to pour the weight of her dress back toward her shoes. At last she bent her knees and rocked forward, nearly collapsing facedown on the stage. Katz caught her and pulled her upright, then guided her carefully onto the pier.

Savino and Grollier led her to the diving bench and unscrewed her helmet. Anna sat leaning over her knees, still thinking she might be sick. A hush encompassed all of them. Had she fallen into the freezing bay with her faceplate open, Anna could have drowned by the time they’d managed to haul her back up. She looked at the wet gray clouds that had covered up the sky while she was below. In one way, it felt like nothing: she was here, everything was fine. But it seemed possible that she still might fall.

Katz stood apart. He ran his hands through his hair and shook his head, then walked to the gangway to speak with the sailor on watch. Grollier and Savino removed Anna's belt and breastplate and shoes. Anna clutched at familiar sounds of the Yard—motors, machinery, shouts—as if they could stop her fall.

Eventually, Katz returned, and they began loading equipment onto the truck. Anna was breaking down the flywheels on the air compressor when three naval officers approached from the ship's gangway in double-breasted blue overcoats with gilt buttons and gold epaulettes.

The senior officer was tall and trim; even his salt-and-pepper hair looked rigorous under the crisp blue hat with its gold braid. "I want to thank you, gentlemen—ma'am—personally," he said, shaking each of their hands and betraying no surprise at the sight of Anna. "Fine work, Mr. Katz. Fine, efficient work."

Katz received this praise flinchingly, as if the words were goading him. Wet snow had begun to fall, but Anna hardly noticed it in the presence of these officers. They had come from the skyscraper ship; they would sail it into battle. In touching its hull, Anna had touched the war directly for the first time—felt the vehemence of its pulse.

When the officers had gone, the gray day closed back around them. Anna felt calm, but Katz was grave and distracted. His eyes wandered to hers, and without intending to, she smiled at him. Katz smiled tentatively back. They each took half the compressor and loaded it onto the truck.

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