

2. Captain of the Damned

There is only silence.

Laura wakes in the passage berth – pulse pounding.

Something isn't right.

She listens for the rhythm of the boat. For any of the unremarkable, subtle noises the *Sea Hawk* makes when it's underway. Nothing. No sound.

No creaking timbers… No wash of waves against the hull…

She stares up at the galley ceiling – at the pot rack mounted overhead. Her tea kettle, fry pan, and cook pot all hang at the ready. Nothing seems out of the ordinary, yet… something persists.

No movement…!

She tries to swallow, but her throat is parched. Constricted. Her tongue drags against the roof of her mouth – thick, dry, coated in grit.

Sand?

She frowns and lifts her hand to her mouth.

Sand on her lips? Crusting her nose?

Sand is spilled across her pillow. A thin dusting of it is gathered in the folds of her blanket. It's everywhere.

She pushes herself upright slowly, every muscle heavy, sore.

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Her feet drop to the cabin sole like stones. She drags them across the wooden floor, collecting granules between her toes. A soft, shifting layer of sand has blown in through the hatch.

She stares at it. Runs her fingers through it.

Where did it come from…?

The air is warm. Stale. Shafts of light filter through curtains of fine dust hanging in the atmosphere. It feels like lying inside a tomb.

Get out... Get out, now!

She rises, steadying herself against the bulkhead, then climbs up the companionway ladder. She slides the hatch open. Blinding white light floods into the interior. She squints, raising a hand to shield her eyes against the glare.

The *Sea Hawk* is motionless – lying half-buried in a bed of sand

There is no wind. No ocean.

Nothing but sun – and sand.

An endless desert.

Laura moves out into the light.

It is hot as she steps off the swim ladder.

Countless undulating dunes stretch from horizon to horizon. As far as the eye can see – drifts of color – golden quartz, burnt sienna, and yellow clay. Huge rolling waves that glitter and squish between her toes.

She lowers her hand to sift through the sticky stuff. Sparkling grains filter between her fingers – catching the sun's rays and reflecting like tiny jewels.

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Where am I?

She turns to look behind her.

The *Sea Hawk* is embedded in a mound of amber – sails sagging – billowing.

How did I get here…?

The sky is deep blue overhead, vast and cloudless, focusing the sun's intensity like a giant magnifying glass – siphoning away her vital energy.

Up one mound and down the next, Laura struggles for footing in the smooth, hot liquefaction. The effort is exhausting – slow going. Each step sinking deeper into the alluvial drift. As she arrives at the top of another large pile, she feels a light breeze – watching as it whips dust into tiny tornadoes that whirl along the ridges at the sandy crest.

The landscape is irradiated. Blinding. Requiring her to shield her eyes from the intense reflection. She unfurls a scarf from around her neck and wraps her head. The fabric is soft, yet unfamiliar.

How long have I had this…?

Heat waves dance off the surface of the sand, obscuring details in the distance. She summits another dune, searching the far horizon, trying to get her bearings. It is a breathtaking expanse of nothingness that surrounds her.

Magnificent. Desolate.

Emptiness for miles in every direction. Just an unfathomable sea of dunes stretching endlessly. No rocks, No scrub. Not a single tree.

Laura's mouth is bone-dry.

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Thirst is all she can think about.

Her tongue rubs against the backs of her teeth like sandpaper. Face burnt – leathery, burnished from windblown grit. The intense rays reduce her clothes to tattered rags. She is shoeless. Hatless.

Her weakened legs fail to support her. They collapse beneath her weight, as the shifting mound gives way, sending her careening down the face of its slope. Down, down, rolling awkwardly – somersaulting to the bottom.

Finally, she splashes down, lying half-buried. Exhausted.

Face down in the sand.

Laura rolls over onto her back – arms outstretched, facing the sky. Breathing heavily – guzzling big, dry gulps of air.

She squints, trying to discern the barren landscape.

Flares of light fill her dry eyes as a shape moves across her field of view. She tries, but cannot bring the silhouette into focus.

“Get up!” It commands her.

She is puzzled by the voice, that speaks with authority.

“Martin?” She coughs – hoarse and throaty.

Rubbing her sore eyes, she tries to make sense of it, but cannot.

“Wake up, Laura!” The directive is more urgent this time.

Suddenly, as if the universe were cracking apart – the light fractures. Darkness folds over her. Not like night, or shadow. More like the closing of a book.

Sound hits her first – a booming reverberation deep in her skull. Then wind –

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violent, tearing – rain slashing across her skin in sheets of cold fire.

She flails in the confines of the void that is shifting – transforming.

The world quakes.

The deck beneath her feet surges into being. She is back onboard the *Sea Hawk*. The boat is pitching and rolling. Salt spray lashes her face from the roil all around.

Blackness is in every direction.

The *Sea Hawk* heaves beneath her.

No details are visible except when lightning flashes across the sky. She clings to the mast, while the wind howls around the boat like a banshee.

Voices rise from the waves – layered, aching with longing. A peculiar fugue calling out from the sea. Demanding her submission while she holds on for dear life.

The song is otherworldly…

Warm. Powerful.

"Haere mai, kāpene…" echoes above the chaos.

A deep metallic tone cuts through the storm – like a peal, or a signal strike. Over and over, ringing in her ears like a weather bell. Again and again, as more tones join in. Each sharper, closer. Too loud to be outside her body.

Then, as quickly as it all began, everything stops.

The universe freezes – rain, wind, bells. Everything grows dark.

All is quiet.

She soars in the nothingness. Weightless. A body without boundaries, the self

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without edges. She simply *'is'* in the vastness of empty space. Being – floating.

Once more, the din forms vague words.

"Not yet…"

Light appears in the distance, getting closer.

Sound floods the silence. Not storm. Not sea.

Voices – growing closer, muffled, using strange language.

Color swells behind her eyelids. A single tone rises – steady, unwavering – too clean to belong to the ocean.

A stabbing pain shoots through her chest.

The sharpness snaps her back into her body.

Back into her bunk on the *Sea Hawk*.

She cries out as the cabin around her sways. The boat is listing, making her nauseous. A convulsion tears through her, twisting her lungs – gasping for air.

Then quiet…

Blackness.

Warmth.

Expansive.

Sounds emanate up from the deep.

The swells of a slow, rolling sea.

Wood flexing.

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A familiar groan from the *Sea Hawk's* hull.

She is prostrate on the cabin sole.

Salt on her lips.

Sand, coarse and glittering, clings to her face and arms.

She can feel the tidal rise beneath her.

She blinks – pain darting behind her eyes.

Her throat rasps. No sound comes out. Her tongue feels swollen… split.

She tries to rise – arms weak, shaking, hands moving strangely.

Numb, like they do not belong to her.

Light spills in through the companionway – white, bright.

Too white – too bright.

Sharp-edged, like a knife cutting across her vision.

Her throat scrapes when she tries to swallow.

No moisture.

Thirsty… so thirsty…

From out of the darkness, more sounds.

There are voices above deck…

Footsteps… of men.

Light on their feet. Barefoot.

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But their footsteps are measured. Unhurried. Men who know the deck of a boat. Men who move with balance ingrained. Movements deliberate.

Their silhouettes move past the hatchway – tall, thin outlines washed in the hard white light. Their faces are in shadow, features lost to the glare. Bodies lean from a life of hauling canvas and lines.

Pirates?

The word takes shape in her recesses.

A reflexive traumatic echo…

But, these men don't reek of hunger or hate. No threatening posture.

Only searching.

One figure pauses the hatch. Turning his head, as if listening keenly. A sound barely audible – meant for him. Then, he looks down. Studying her.

She cannot see his face – only the suggestion of one. The light strips it away, leaving only the outline of a man – bent, weathered by a thousand storms. Breath catches in her throat. Lungs aching in their cage.

A voice – low, course, like old rope sliding through a shiv.

"She's alive." The tone is not cruel – nor kind. Knowing. "She bears the signs..."

The words hang in the cabin like mist.

Another answers back – distorted, like words spoken underwater.

"The tide took her."

Another – softer, from an unseen mouth; behind her, or beneath her. She can't tell.

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“Aye, it returned her.”

Laura tries to speak through cracked lips. Her tongue thick – useless.

“Whh…” The breath escapes her, as her vision doubles and the world sways.

The first silhouette steps closer. It looks down at her, past her face, to her stomach. A stillness gathers. Not heavy, but somehow reverent. Almost gentle.

He reaches for her, then hesitates — turns aside. “Tell him…” Voices churn, layered and distant, like surf breaking over stone. “The situation’s changed.”

A hush settles over them, like a breath held by the ocean itself. Then, softly he speaks, with reverence not often heard by the living – but garbled – unclear.

“She carried… providence… across… time…”

The air in the cabin grows heavy – pressure tightening, like a sail filling before a gust. They move no closer, watching, waiting – weighing a decision. The wind shifts.

Carried what?

A shock of sound fills her ears, while the world contracts.

A voice – closer, sharper… human. Shouting through the veil.

“Hold her steady… she’s seizing!”

The companionway light shatters into fluorescent glare.

The silhouette in the hatchway becomes a figure in scrubs.

The compression post becomes an IV tree.

The rolling of the sea becomes the shaking of her body.

The cabin sole becomes a gurney.

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The creak of rigging becomes the squealing of wheels on tile.

She is flying.

But the shadows of the sailors do not disappear. They only step back – into the shadows. Bleeding into the edges of her vision.

Biding their time… watching.

A human voice speaks – direct – urgent.

“Laura, can you hear me?”

Hands – real hands – human hands, are on her now. Many of them – moving, guiding, securing. Working with haste.

“Her BP is falling…”

Another voice responds. “She’s thready – sixty-eight over thirty-five”

Lights flashing in her eyes, “We’re losing her…”

“Laura?” Desperate hands touching her face. “Stay with us!”

Her vision pulses – desert white, sea-foam white, hospital white.

She screams, “White horses… rolling over..!”

Her body is burning up.

“Mayday, mayday…”

The sailors quietly bear witness – just beyond the reach of the light – shadows in the periphery of the room, dissolving into the walls.

Voices in dark harmony, “Not yet…”

Laura’s feverish – speaking in tongues.

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“Tempestates ypochoro deomai!”

At her command, the world stops.

Held in place in space and time.

Raindrops are suspended all around her.

Waves are frozen mid-splash.

The sails on the boat turn hard like glass and shatter.

A shaft of light cuts through the chaos and illuminates the deck all around Laura. Holding her hand out at arm’s length, she squints looking up into it. It is safe, warm, loving – familiar.

“Martin?” She calls into the void.

As the sailors retreat, one cocks his head slightly, as if listening to a distant tide.

The light behind them shifts – not brighter, not dimmer – just warmer, then colder, then whiter, then bright in a way that is not sun, not sky, not sea.

The air changes.

Sand and salt, rope and teak, become: iodine, alcohol wipes, sterile gauze, plastic trays and rubber tubing. A sharp, medicinal sting cuts through the dryness in her throat. Her stomach lurches. The burning desert sun becomes a gleaming examination light, blinding and cold.

The shapes above her sharpen, as the world starts to resolve.

Her name becomes real again.

A figure addresses her, strong, in control.

“Laura… Can you hear me?”

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The sound of the sea is still there, reverberating into the distance. A wave of warmth washes over her. And for now… the living have hold of the rope.

The world draws itself in with a single, measured breath. Noise follows , rushing past. Hands move around her – fast, practiced, overlapping. Fabric rustles. Metal clinks. Plastic snaps. The rhythm of a battlefield. The urgency of a storm.

Someone lifts her head.

Someone presses something to her face – a mask – soft plastic – tight straps. Air floods her lungs, cold and sharp. She chokes, coughs, gasps – her chest seizes against it. Her ribs feel bruised. Cracked. Broken from the inside.

"Easy – easy – there you go…" The voice whispers in her ear. Close. Gentle. Female. Her tone is steady – like someone soothing a frightened animal.

Laura tries to open her eyes.

Light cuts in – sharp – intense.

She shuts them again.

She hears monitors beeping, fast and high, like a frightened heart. Something pinches her arm – a needle, a line being threaded.

"Line in." Another voices shouts.

The doctor is checking Laura's pulse.

"Good. Start the fluids."

A cool rush travels up her veins. Her body trembles. Waves of pain, then relief hit at the same time, like ripples on a pond.

Somewhere nearby – someone is crying.

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A thin, keening wail.

It takes a moment to realize…

She feels it only in the way her chest heaves.

Her throat makes no sound.

Hands press her shoulders – stabilizing her – not restraining – just holding her together because she is shaking apart.

“Laura, listen to me.” The voice again. The gentle one. “You’re safe now. We’ve got you.” It pauses, studying her reaction. “Can you hear me?”

Safe…

Her lips move. A whisper of air escapes – no voice – only a thought.

Water…

Someone hears anyway. “Yes. I know. We’re giving you fluids. Just breathe.”

She tries again – breath raw. Tears.

“Pan-Pan… Pan-Pan…”

A flicker of something passes across the nurse’s face. Concern, confusion, sympathy? Hard to tell in the glare.

“You’re okay. They found you. You’re alive, Laura… just stay with us.”

Alive…

The word lands like a stone dropped in the deep, blue, Pacific. Sinking through the depths, further and further, until it passes out of sight…

No end to it… no end…

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She’s rambling from the drugs.

The nurse watches her closely as Laura dreams – fighting for her life on two separate planes of existence.

The attending ER physician takes her pulse by the bedside.

“Where is she, Doctor?” The nurse asks.

“It’s the dehydration mixing with the meds.” He says. “She’ll be okay. They found her adrift. She must have gone for days without sufficient water. Her brain is under a lot of strain. We’ll have to bring her back slow.” He pauses to check her abdomen. “I suspect there might be a little gastrointestinal toxicity involved as well. A complication from the dehydration. Let’s wait and see what the labs tell us. Maybe we can add some proton pump inhibitors to the cocktail once she is stable.”

He checks her monitors one last time. Checks her chart. Makes a note.

“In the meantime, have your people keep her hydrated. Let’s give her two hundred fifty milliliters every hour until she stabilizes. Then, we can take another look at her blood glucose levels and adjust the electrolytes again. Keep her calm and sedated.” He goes to leave, then adds one more thing. “Oh, and no visitors.”

Laura’s vision flickers open – just for a moment. The room is white. With white curtains. Metal rails. Movement everywhere. Faces she does not know. And in the far corner – a shadow stands.

Watching. Not moving, just waiting.

Martin..?

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The monitor beeps slowly. Her body loosens its hold on pain.

Sleep, heavy and tidal, pulls her under.

Darkness again. But not the same darkness as before.

This one has edges.

Soft edges…



Laura is back aboard the Sea Hawk.

She is lying in her familiar bunk; weak, hungry, and exhausted. The boat is gently swaying on the waves in a long, lazy cadence. Outside, the breeze is raspy as it picks its way through the loose rigging. The sails luff, limp and dry in the evening air.

The swells remind the body what the mind forgets.

Thirsty….

She reaches for a bottle of water. Puts it to her lips in anticipation of a cool, refreshing drink. Nothing comes out. The bottle is empty. The welcome relief dematerializes before she can take a sip.

No more water…

A green light pulses somewhere in the cabin. Then red. Then green again.

Slow. Patient. Like breathing.

She doesn't remember setting her equipment.

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The boat creaks – timbers settling, as it rides the current.

Sometime in the night, the *Sea Hawk's* sails were drawn in. The storm jib was set. A contingency in her weakened state, but again she has no recollection of doing so. The boat is more stable, but her speed over water has slowed – raising the stakes in a race against time.

Down in the passage berth, she lies motionless, doubled over with cramps and nausea. Feeling the urge to vomit, she rolls over on her side and heaves into a trash bin left beside her bunk. Mostly dry spasms mixed with sticky bile.

There is little to manage, given her lack of appetite.

The cabin closes in.

She can feel herself beginning to black out.

Laura clutches the bulkhead, trying to regain control, when something captures her attention. A sound, so completely implausible that it confuses her senses. A thin cry threads through the darkness. Distant at first, then closer.

Not a gull.

Not the rigging.

An infant…?

Her breath catches. "No… no… please…"

Outside, the arid breeze mixes with the mysterious whining.

Out here? At the crease of existence…?

She fights the fatigue, calling out. "Someone, help us!" consciousness dwindling.

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Will anyone come…?

There is no answer from the darkness.

Only a plaintive bleating – faint, faceless. She knows that sound. Old sailors' wives speak of it in whispers and chanteys – about the ones who never returned from the edge of the world.

As she listens, she knows.

They are searching for her.

She clasps her hands in fear and suppliance.

Her desperate appeal carried by the waves outside.

Somewhere in the distance, an elliptical answer calls back. Becoming a wail. The wail becoming a steady tone.

No – not a tone… A beacon.

Beep… Beep… Beeping.

Soft edges…



It is early the next morning when a nurse enters Laura's room.

She creeps through the darkened space. Monitors blink erratically, casting shadows in the gloom. Her hand reaches for the drapes – throwing them open with a *WHOOSH!*

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The noise startles Laura, stirring from her troubled slumber.

Gilded, tropical light penetrates the room in long dappled shafts.

The nurse opens the window.

Fresh air billows into the room – carrying with it the songs of morning birds. While sweet aromas from the Polynesian flora attack Laura's nose.

"Good morning, missus!" The nurse trilled.

Laura tries to respond, smacking her lips, but her throat is too dry.

"Don't worry, dear. I'm just glad to see you awake!" She smiles checking Laura's pulse. "You been through a lot, child."

She fetches a bottle of water from a tray and holds it to Laura's lips.

Laura gulps the liquid greedily.

Startled, the nurse pulls it away. "Take it easy, ma'am! Not too much. Gonna take some time to set things right. Slowly, now!" She takes the water from Laura's hands and sets it back on the table.

Laura follows it with her eyes, longing for it – just out of reach.

The nurse fluffs Laura's pillows, allowing her to sit up.

"It's a beautiful day. If you're up for it, I'll take you for a walk later. Maybe?"

Laura can only nod. Talking seems to be out of the question for the time being.

"Okay! Good. The doctor will be in to see you shortly. Don't go away!" She laughs playfully. "Press the call button if you need anything."

Laura does her best to smile graciously. Much more would be too painful.

The nurse leaves the room, filled with the sounds and smells of Tahiti, as Laura

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slips back into a light, quiet sleep.

Later in the day…

Her blackout curtains have been drawn closed.

Laura wakes to see a figure at the foot of her bed. It's a man, in silhouette, set against streaks of afternoon sunlight that slip past the window shades and rake the wall behind him.

Her eyes are crusted over. Blurry. She strains to see him clearly.

The man does not speak. He only looks down at her.

"Laura…"

She recoils, dull-witted and groggy from the medication.

It feels like forever and a day since she heard her name spoken out loud.

I've made a mess of things, haven't I..?

She is still unsure which state of existence she occupies.

Have you come for me..?

She frets – not knowing if he is real, or a figment of her fractured mind.

The man reaches toward Laura, then flips a switch beside her bed.

The overhead florescent light flickers to life, revealing her attending physician adjusting the diagnostic equipment. He is focused on her vitals, checking her iv solution – making careful notes.

The doctor is reading her chart when he notices Laura wake.

"Good afternoon… Laura, is it?" he pauses to check. "How do you feel?" he asks.

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She wrestles with her reality for a moment.

“A little dry in the mouth…” She tries to sit up, but the nausea returns. “… and a bit nauseous,” she groans.

“That will subside shortly.” He decides to dive right in. “Are you in any pain? I have you…”

Laura cuts him off. “… Where am I? Who are you?”

“Please, forgive me!” He bows politely, placing his right hand over his heart – revealing an ornate alumni ring. “You are on the island of Tahiti. This is the city of Pape’etē.” He gestures at the surroundings. “You are in the Hospitalier Du Ta’aone, Pirae.” He proudly introduces himself. “I am Doctor Abadie, at your service!”

“Hospital? How did I get here? Where is my boat?” She motions toward the tubes in her arms – all the machines. “And what is all this? What are you pumping into me?”

“I’m terribly sorry!” He says backing up a step. “I’ve forgotten my manners! If you will allow me?” He clasps his hands – begins again.

“You came to us two nights ago. You were brought to Tahiti by the authorities. Apparently, you were found adrift near the barrier islands. Your boat was floating with the current.”

He pauses to measure her reaction.

“Luckily, your position was reported by fisherman, over shortwave radio, and a team was sent to intercept you. When they found your vessel, you were collapsed and unresponsive. That is how you came to be here.”

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A mild tension builds behind her eyes, as Laura tries desperately to fill in the blank spots in her patchy memory. She questions her own recollections, blurred between real and unreasonable.

"You're actually quite lucky! If someone hadn't spotted you, you might have drifted past the Tuamotu islands and into the western end of the Pacific Triangle. There you could have drifted for weeks before being rescued."

"Where is my boat?" Laura asks absentmindedly.

"Ah! Your vessel was transported here and turned over to the Gendarmerie at the L'Association des Voiliers, near the nouvelle marina a Pape'etē." He can see she is having difficulty. "I assure you it is quite safe."

Laura is triggered by the idea of the *Sea Hawk* being impounded.

"Yeah, I can't stay here. I have to get back to…"

She loses her balance and falls back into bed.

Doctor Abadie catches her, then looks at her chart again.

"Woah! Easy now. This is most likely nothing, but you should avoid over-exertion until your condition stabilizes." He emphasizes caution. "You were at sea for several weeks. And you were not in tip-top condition when they found you."

He relaxes a bit. "A little lightheadedness is to be expected."

He puts on his stethoscope and listens to her heart. Then her lungs, and abdomen.

She watches him skeptically.

"Anyway, once we get you on your feet, that feeling should subside in a day or two." He turns to his nurse. "I'd like to start titration on her iv – just a little. The

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numbers are shaping up nicely. There's just one data set I want to look at more closely." He smiles at Laura – giving her a probing look.

The nurse nods affirmatively, taking notes.

Laura clocks his vague expression with suspicion.

He hesitates, then asks a curious question.

"When you arrived, you were alone. The authorities did not mention any crew." He studies her closely. "Did you sail the Pacific passage by yourself?" He asks, giving her a dubious look. "That's… a long voyage. Most don't attempt it alone."

Laura shifts uncomfortably, "I've been through worse." She says with a wince. "What is this?" She asks, gesturing to the iv solution.

"Just electrolytes in a saline solution. You were extremely dehydrated when they brought you in." He plays it off. "The other solution is 2mg ketamine to help make you more comfortable. We are presently titrating both solutions to coincide with your improving symptoms."

"Titrating? Ketamine? You sedated me? I thought you said I was unconscious?"

He looks a little uncomfortable with her question.

"At first…Yes. However, we quickly realized you were battling psychosis. That is to say… you were…" he answers tactfully. "…Shall we say acutely excited? Hallucinating. Badly. It took three of my staff to stabilize you – get you safely in bed. I'm afraid it was… necessary." Then he offers, "It was for your own good."

"I see…" She sighs.

She concedes, giving her tacit approval for the administration of more drugs.

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Abating her cross-examination. For now.

He smiles at her, then turns to the nurse. “Oh, by the way, I thought I said no visitors?”

The nurse is indignant. “No visitors, no sir! I’m sure of it.”

“Very well. I thought I saw a man in here earlier. Make sure our patient is kept calm. I don’t want anything getting her too excited. That includes visits.” He gives her a look – emphasizes, “Of any kind.”

“No visitors. Yes, sir. I’ll see to it.”

The doctor’s last comment catches Laura’s attention.

“Wait. What man?” She demands.

“Not to worry. I am sure it was nothing, ma’am. Simply a misunderstanding.” The nurse is evasive, hesitating to make eye contact.

Laura finds her reaction unsettling.

Doctor Abadie avoids any further exchanges. Moving quickly for the door.

Laura sees it on his face.

Something he is not saying – a flicker of fear?

He turns, giving the nurse a conspiratory look as he exits the room.

The nurse scrutinizes her clipboard – avoiding the issue.

It’s obvious the pair are keeping something from her – the implications of which make Laura’s blood boil.

What are they hiding?

The nurse fluffs Laura’s pillows and helps her sit up.

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"Doctor just seeing things, miss. Overworked. Nobody been here. If so, I know!" She gives Laura an uncomfortable smile. "Now, try to have some Jello. Lime! My favorite."

Laura winces at the prospect as the nurse hands her a cup and spoon. She sniffs at it suspiciously. Pokes at it with the utensil. The nausea has killed her appetite.

"Do you have any juice?" she asks – a little fussy.

"Ah, juice! That's good! Yes, of course! We have lots of juice for you. Drink as much as you like." She reaches into her cart and selects a juice box. She opens it and places it near Laura on her meal tray. Then, she adjusts the bed level and places the nurse's call button where Laura can reach it. One final glance at the monitors, and she exits the room.

Laura takes a pull from the juice box, just a small sip – carefully this time. She cannot stop thinking about what the doctor said. His words reverberate like a warning.

"*I thought I said no visitors?…No visitors…No visitors…"*

Her mind circles this, again and again.

Reality has felt thin for a long time – like living in two worlds simultaneously. In this one, she is a victim, a refugee – afraid. In the other, she is tried and tested, battling for control.

She drifts back to sleep, troubled by more dreams and visions, the intensity of which are increasing. Meanwhile, birds in flight outside her window cast eerie shadows on the wall. The cries of the gulls call to her.

Though their message is muffled and strange…

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Once again, sleep brings forth a profound blackness.

Laura stands alone.

She feels the place, before she sees it. Damp. Earthy.

Rain drops are peppering her face – misty and cold.

Light begins to gather all around her – revealing a somber but familiar scene.

The day they buried Martin.

A pastor is delivering his eulogy to a group of ashen mourners.

Their shoulders hunched – heads bowed beneath black umbrellas.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth…"

She looks around at the coterie gathered at the cemetery.

They are huddled close, pressed together for warmth, surrounding Martin's coffin like a tableau of collective sorrow.

She walks among them in her hospital gown, but nobody seems to notice.

The eulogy continues. "And God said, 'Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water. So God made the vault, and it was so. Calling the vault sky."

Claire is there. Crying.

She stands, holding Charles by the arm. Raw. Vulnerable, as the pastor reads from the Book of Genesis.

"And God said, 'Let the water under the sky be gathered, and let dry ground

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appear.' And it was so. God called the dry ground 'land,' and the gathered waters he called 'seas.' And God saw that it was good."

The words curl from the pastor's lips – like smoke in the humid air.

Lillian is there too, looking idly down at the coffin – icy and unreadable. Her face is drawn. Her poise collected.

Stupid… projects from her thoughts without her lips moving.

Laura notices her mother loathing the attendees.

Or is it calculation?

Then, in a move that startles Laura, Lillian looks directly toward her and mouths the word… *" Choose!"*

Laura gasps, recoiling in horror. She approaches Lillian, who continues to look blankly past her. Laura sets her eyes upon her mother, but Lillian does not return her gaze. Laura waves a hand in front of Lillian's unresponsive face.

"And God said, 'Let there be lights in the vault to separate day from night, and God made the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. Then, God set them in the vault to shed light upon the Earth."

Laura turns to look at the polished coffin – shiny and slick under the relentless drizzle – teetering on the funeral bier. A dark anchor, weeping with raindrops, suspended above a freshly excavated hole. A single white lily is placed alone atop the casket. A soggy symbol set against a garden of granite.

"…and so, let it be thus, until you return to the ground; for dust you are, and unto dust you shall return."

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Laura studies the mise-en-scene.

The family is gathered together. Charles and his wife sit behind, followed by Alan. In the middle ground stands Salty – Chip is beside him. Deep in the background, men from the firm are standing silently.

That's not right…

Then, emerging from behind, she sees Martin.

He steps forward to position himself among these men.

Her eyes go wide with shock.

Her throat is constricted as she tries to call out. "Martin!?!"

The sensation of bubbles in water drowns out her voice.

Lightning cracks in the sky overhead. Flashes of plasma backlight Martin's frame.

The world goes black around him as a light shines from above.

He mouths the same words. *"Not yet…"*

A brilliant light flashes in Laura's eyes.

Suddenly, she finds herself treading water.

Floundering in a tumult of wind and waves, gasping for air…

She is sweating profusely, when her thrashing wakes her from the dream.

Disoriented at first – she slowly recognizes the hospital room.

She is safe in her bed.

Monitors blinking.

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Covers drenched – cast off from her body.

Through a gap in the curtains, Laura can see that it is sunrise. A warm glow is radiating into the room – dispelling her anxiety, along with the macabre imagery.

The early nurse visits with a wheelchair and a clipboard. She draws open the curtains and checks the machines. Then, she turns to address Laura. Her tone is quiet and comforting.

"Good morning missus. How are we feeling today?"

She asks cautiously, moving to the bedside to take Laura's pulse.

"A bit high."

She checks for swollen glands, then dabs Laura's sweaty forehead.

Laura is not comfortable with all the poking and prodding.

"I'm…" She is interrupted before she can pose any objections.

The nurse jams a thermometer into Laura's mouth.

She counts down, looking at her watch. Then, she pulls it out, looks at it intently, and puts it in her pocket. "Good," she says, jotting the findings on her clipboard.

Laura tries to finish her statement. "I was going to say…"

"…How about a walk around the grounds? Hhm?" the nurse interrupts. She clicks her pen and pockets it – tucks the clipboard under her arm.

"Yes, a walk would be nice." Laura agrees.

The nurse smiles compassionately. "Good. Some fresh air be *whai painga* for your head… Clears the mind."

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The automatic doors swing open, as they depart the recovery ward.

Instantly, they are met by the intoxicating perfume of Tahitian gardenias, tropical vanilla, and coconut oil. The sweet aroma of Frangipani fills the air. Sunshine blends with the ocean breezes, creating a warm and lingering impression of paradise that Laura soaks in like a tonic.

The nurse takes in a deep breath, then gives Laura a knowing glance.

“That’s better. Fresh air cleanses the soul!” She turns toward Laura. “So, you’re the Kōtuku, eh? Rare bird – touched by the sea?” She nods vaguely – smiles. “We don’t see many like you.” She avoids any serious explanations – softening her tone. “I am pleased to meet you.” She bows her head, “You may call me nurse Aida.”

“My name is Laura,” sounding embarrassed. “But, you already knew that…”

They walk for a short distance, then Aida opens the conversation.

“Night nurse tells me you have fitful sleep. Hhm?” she asks tactfully. “Nightmares and such? Calls it night terrors.” Tsk, tsk. “Dis sound like you?”

“Yes…” Laura replies sheepishly.

They walk along some flower beds, ablaze with colors and pleasant floral smells. A bird is chirping in a nearby tree, promoting a sense of calm in the garden area. The breeze is filled with the exotic tang of the tropics. The hospital grounds are a blend of

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rich, fruity notes mixed with sandalwood, and freshly cut grass.

"Wanna talk about it?" Aida asks.

Laura considers whether or not to trust this woman.

"I am not sure, really. I guess so, yes. If it will help." She pauses to clarify. "It's just that I don't know what the dreams mean. Sometimes, they seem like visions; other times, like things from my past" she says, trying to make sense of it. "You know what I mean? Everything gets mixed up."

Aida listens intently, then nods, as if understanding.

"Sometimes I don't understand what's happening. Are the nightmares trying to tell me something?" Laura asks. "It's like some kind of riddle to be solved."

"Aye, miss. I think I understand. A most unnatural business!" She continues to walk. "Lots of sailors come here for treatments. Too long at sea and such. Some in pretty bad shape. Some in their bodies, and some in their minds. This ocean, my people call it 'Moananuiākea', means the great expansive water. It is not to be trifled with. We must respect the sea and its power."

Laura falls silent.

"Many strange stories come from travelers across the sea." She pauses to draw another deep breath. "Not all is good." She says looking toward the water. "People *see* things." She looks at Laura with suspicion. "*Supernatural* things. You know?" She studies Laura.

Laura pauses for a moment.

"Can you keep a secret?" Laura asks cautiously.

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“Aye, lady!” Without warning, she whips the wheelchair around and ducks behind a hedge. She pokes her head out to see if the coast is clear. Then, she looks back at Laura. “You see something out there? Hhm? Something makes you lose sleep? Tell old Aida!” The nurse crosses herself as she presses for the details.

Laura can see this woman is deeply superstitious.

“I saw… a ship… I think. A very old one. It wasn’t clear at first. It was all aglow in a greenish light – like it was on fire.” Her voice trails off.

She remembers the ghostly light clearly.

“It was headed right for me…” She said softly. “We were on a collision course. There was nothing I could do to avoid it crashing into my boat… broadside. Then, at the last second, it disintegrated into a million green embers – like fireflies! The greenish glow enveloped everything with pulsing light. And then, as quickly as it appeared… It was gone.” Laura shudders at the thought.

Aida is wide-eyed. “Oh, Lordy! You seen it then. The ghost ship!” She crosses herself, makes a series of strange gestures, then crosses herself again.

Laura watches her futile attempt at self-defense. She also notices the way Aida’s accent returns when anxious.

“You know about it then?” Laura asks.

“Aye! Lots of stories about ghost ships in this part of the world.” Aida whispers. “As long as people been coming here in boats, they tellin’ stories ‘bout ghost ships. Strange lights at sea.” She hesitates – eyes shifting. “Other stuff, too!”

Aida’s remarks leave her uneasy, but curiosity gets the better of her. “Tell me,

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Aida?" She asks earnestly. "I need the truth."

Nurse Aida smirks, resuming their walk along a well-manicured duck pond.

Plump waterfowl waddle and fuss around a small artificial lagoon, rollicking in their fabricated world, indifferent to their medicated audience sitting nearby.

The patients, infused and sedated, watch the wildlife through vacant glassy eyes.

The irony is not lost on Laura. She has experienced this kind of dull existence before – from many sides. Trapped in monotonous repetition. Orbiting the ordinary. Consigned to drift – lacking direction.

Ducks are like people…

Aida watches and walks while pushing the wheelchair.

"Let's see. Where to begin…"

Laura perks up to listen.

As Nurse Aida strolls, she tells Laura the story of a French trading vessel, its ill-fated captain, and the tragic fate of its crew.

"In the shallow waters off Pape'etē, Tahiti, sailors tell yarns of *Le Téméraire*, a merchant steamer that wrecked on the reef more than two hundred years ago. The ship was bound for Nouméa, carrying French settlers and supplies. It was said the vessel was cursed from the start." She speaks of verbal traditions passed down by her kin.

"The story goes that Le Capitaine defied the sea using Mākutu – what some folks call witchcraft – ignoring the warnings of his Tahitian pilot. As they neared the reef, a

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storm rolled in as if conjured by the spirits of the deep. The ship was torn apart on the coral, its hull shattered, and its crew thrown into the black water. Some say Le Capitaine, in his arrogance, tried to command the sea itself – but the sea does not abide by the will of men." She crosses herself once more. "None survived…"

She pauses, raising a crooked finger. "Or, so they say!"

Laura's thoughts swirl as she recalls her own experience – comparing it to Nurse Aida's ghostly tale.

"For centuries, sailors passing the reef on moonless nights have claimed to see *Le Téméraire* sailing in eerie silence, its tattered sails filled with an unearthly wind. It continues to sail – doomed.

Some say they see figures aboard, barely more than shadows – flickering like candlelight. Others have sworn they heard whispers on the wind. Voices calling out in long forgotten Creole."

Aida shivers, then collects herself. "Some say they searchin'." She hesitates, dreading the next part. "They say the worst fate of all awaits the poor soul who sees Le Capitaine himself. They say if you glimpse that gruesome revenant standing at the helm – dressed in his officer's tunic, with a face gaunt and hollow-eyed – turn away! Legend says he be searching for a soul to relieve him of his ill-fated command." She shakes off her uneasiness.

"Steals your soul, they say… beware, *Le Téméraire*!"

Nurse Aida's hands tremble, as she grips the wheelchair out of fear.

"I know this much. If'n you sees this vessel, you are part of somethin' *dupon,*"

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Laura's eyes go wide. Her lips purse at the term 'dupon.'

Aida senses her audience is spellbound – despite her Tahitian slang.

"Dupon means 'Not of this world.' Haitian word," she explains. "Problem is… aint no *safe harbor* for the damned. So, they kept sailin'. Some say they sailin' still."

Nurse Aida turns a corner, and they are back at the doors of the hospital.

She winks at Laura and asks, "Whatcha tink?"

Laura purses her lips. "Do you suppose that is what I saw?" she asks. "Was it *Le Téméraire*?"

"Dunno. Maybe." Aida shrugs. "I knows this… if'n they sought after you… out there? You meant for somethin' unlucky… for sure."

Laura shudders at the idea of being unwitting quarry for a tormented captain.

Nurse Aida chuckles. "C'mon, miss. Time to tuck you in."

She wheels Laura back inside the ward, past the nurses station, down the hall and into her room. "Safe and sound. No phantoms here."

"I'm not sure where safe *is* anymore…" Laura shivers.

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Laura is standing outside of her hospital room.

Somehow, she has made it out of bed, and into the hallway of the recovery ward.

It is the middle of the night, and there is a tremendous thunderstorm outside. Rain

is coming down in heavy drops that drum on the windowpanes. Lightning plays on the walls opposite the windows, casting ominous shadows that create an illusion of the hallway… weeping.

A power outage has disrupted the building's general operations.

The only available light comes from the twinkle of hundreds of LED status lights, all over the ward – blinking like the stars out on the open ocean at night.

Laura wanders the halls confused.

There is something off-kilter. There are no nurses, no patients, no staff of any kind. She is alone.

She walks down the abandoned corridor calling out.

“Hello? Is there anybody here..?”

It’s as if everyone vanished.

She tries to focus. Searching her memory – retracing her steps.

What could have happened?

Where has everyone gone?

Somewhere in the building, she hears a small voice. It is *crying* – thin and reedy, distinctive – close. It is the wail of an infant – innocent, unsettling. Much like the cries she heard adrift in the *Sea Hawk*, as the doldrums slowly consumed her.

More cries echo in the gloaming.

Laura cautiously navigates her uncanny surroundings.

She rounds a corner, passing an abandoned nurses’ station. Still no one. The entire floor is empty, like staff dropped what they were doing… and simply left.

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She picks her way down another spooky hallway. Dimly lit.

There, she is met with an overwhelming feeling of dread.

She strains her eyes to see through the shadows.

A figure waits at the other end of the corridor. Its eyes are ghastly dark sockets. Its arms cradle something. A small, swaddled bundle that wriggles slightly in its grip.

The crying persists.

She draws near. Frowns.

The shape of a man emerges from the gloom.

He appears to be drenched – standing in a puddle of seawater, wearing a woolen tunic and the pantaloons of a seaman. *His* blouse is torn and salt-stiff. *His* feet are bare, and *his* skin is crusted by the sea. *He* bears no insignia – no rank or affiliation.

Laura's pulse pounds in her ears, to the rhythm of Nurse Aida's prophecy.

"...the worst fate of all awaits the poor soul who sees Le Capitaine..."

Her skin prickles.

Estes-vous le Capitaine du Teméraire?

From under his cloak, he produces a child.

She looks in horror as the mysterious figure displays it at arm's length. Taunting her with revelation.

The sight triggers a wave of nausea – dizziness.

Lightning strikes again, illuminating the figure. Thunder follows, reverberating through the halls. Carrying with it, subtly but unmistakable, a single name.

"Laura.."

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Terrified, Laura cries out. “Don’t hurt it…”

No answer.

“What do you want..?”

The specter pulls the baby close to its breast and points menacingly at Laura. In a boomy voice, the being responds simply, “Mother…” Then, *he* gestures toward the child. “Providence...”

The baby’s crying continues, getting louder. The wailing penetrates Laura’s chest. Ear-splitting. She claps her hands to her head to quell the clamor – then screams back in terror as a tremendous gale blows through the passageway like a tornado.

“Who are you?” She fights to protect her eyes. “Why are you here?”

Her pleas reverberate through the unearthly squall wreaking havoc in the hallway.

Who are you? What do you want..?

Who are you? What do you want..?

Laura is overwhelmed by the forces at work. Debris flies hazardously through the air, causing her to slump in terror to the floor.

The wind whistles in her ears like a freight train as she buckles in pain...

In the flurry, she is whisked back to her room.

Laura wakes sailing sideways, crumpled against the wall – like being shot out of a cannon.

She shrieks, shaking violently, drenched in sweat.

Her screams have alerted the staff, who can be heard scrambling to address the

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commotion. They find her on the floor, trembling uncontrollably, dripping in cold sweat. She has upended the food tray beside her bed.

Jell-O and juice are everywhere…

Morning arrives in a blur.

Laura lies twitching – obsessing over the chaos of her hallucinations.

No evidence remains of the ghostly visitation. Her door has been left ajar – and the disruption of her bed linens and breakfast tray are gone.

Only anxiety remains.

The sun rises in the sky. Dogs bark in the street, and the gulls screech outside her window. Aside from her hysterics, the world seems… *normal*.

As the sunlight filters into her room, the day to day sounds of the hospital return to Laura's ears. Telephones, call bells, announcements over the pa system – create the mundane background sounds of life on the ward.

The troubling projections and ambiguity have left Laura exhausted and shaken. She lies down on sheets soaked through with sweat – trying desperately to decipher meaning from the omens in her dream.

"Christ, what's happening to me...?" She wimpers quietly to herself.

Like clockwork, the nurse enters, wheeling a food cart in front of her. She takes no immediate note of Laura's frazzled frame of mind. She appears preoccupied with her breakfast inventory. Without looking up from her paperwork, she asks, "Good morning, lady! How did you sleep?"

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Laura is still in shock. “Are you kidding? Look at me!”

Aida can see that Laura is in obvious discomfort. “Oh, ma'am! I am sorry. You do look a bit distressed. Are you alright?” her tone is patronizing. “Did you have another one of your nightmares? Tsk, tsk! Poor dear!”

“I’ll say.” Laura’s mood is grim. “It was horrible…”

The nurse sits at her bedside.

“Tell Aida. What bedevils you, child?”

“Don’t patronize me, nurse! Can’t you see I’m exhausted?” Laura grasps her head in both hands. “I don’t understand these nightmares. There’s some kind of meaning buried in them, but what I am supposed to do about it?”

Nurse Aida adjusts her tone. “I am sorry, dear. I don’t mean to be crass. I can see you are truly upset.” She pauses to take a deep breath. “How can I help?”

Laura sees she is being genuine and softens.

Then, the nausea returns.

She gags. “Well, for one thing, you can take that tray away before I vomit!”

Laura begins to heave repeatedly.

She gets up from her bed to run to the bathroom – retching uncontrollably.

The nurse observes this behavior closely. Having seen this affliction before. It didn’t take long, once Laura’s symptoms stabilized

Nurse Aida turns white as a ghost when Laura emerges from the bathroom.

Laura notices Aida’s expression. “Jesus! You look like how I feel!” She groans.

“How long you been feelin’ this way, ma'am?” Aida asks suspiciously.

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Laura pauses to think about it. “I don’t know. For a while now,” she says. “It has gotten worse in the last week or so. Why? Is it the medication?”

Suddenly, the nurse changes her tone – visibly disturbed.

“Not for me to say, ma’am. Better let the doctor *explain things as they are!*”

Laura doesn’t understand this change in tone. “What do you mean? Why not? What’s going on?” She kicks away her breakfast tray. “Am I still sick?”

The nurse flees the room without a word.

“Come back here. Why won’t you answer me?”

The nausea is coming back in waves.

Laura puts her hand over her stomach to heave again. When she does, a single thought resonates with her touch.

She has felt this way before…



Dr. Abadie is heading toward Laura’s room in response to all the commotion.

He is about to enter when a bedpan is launched out the door, careening past his ear, clattering against the wall behind him.

“Why won’t you answer me..?!” comes the cry from inside.

A fitful commotion is transpiring.

He steps aside as the wellness team runs for cover.

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The step-down nurse comes running out exasperated.

“Pupule,” she curses under her breath. “That woman is crazy!”

Dr. Abadie reacts calling out the door. “Aida, grab a tech and meet me in here.” He pauses for a moment, then adds, “And, bring me more Ketamine.”

The doctor listens for sounds of aggression, coming from inside, then grabs a clipboard off the wall next to Laura’s door. He starts to enter, sees the hysteria unfolding, and pokes his head out the door toward the nurse’s station.

“Nurse? Better make it two milligrams. We need to contain this – stat.”

He enters the room as the breakfast tray comes sailing through the air in his direction. He ducks as it crashes onto the floor out in the hallway.

Laura is furious – spitting expletives.

Her voice rasps with accusations spilling faster than breath.

Nurse Aida and her staff enter – she is brandishing a syringe. The rest come prepared with more clean towels.

Laura howls as though possessed.

“Damn you! How long have you known?”

She is on her feet, lashing out at the doctor.

Two candy strippers enter to restrain Laura from any further violent outbursts. They put her back in bed by force as the nurse administers the tranquilizer.

Almost immediately, her speech begins to quaver.

Laura begins to cry uncontrollably.

The sights and sounds of her trauma melt, running like watercolors down a page.

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“Get it out of me!” she groans. “Those bastards!” she curses. “They raped me and left me to die!” She repeats her demands louder this time. “Get it out of me… NOW!”

The staffers hold Laura fast, shielding her and the doctor alike.

The nurse attempts to check Laura’s vitals, but she gets pushed away by reserves of strength. The doctor tries to reason with Laura to get her to calm down, while gradually the ketamine takes effect – quelling her rage.

“Please, Laura! Get a grip on yourself. Tell me what happened?” he demands. “Don’t be alarmed. We’re trying to help you!”

The nurse monitors Laura’s pulse rate.

“I was afraid of this,” he admits. “The dehydration disguised the pregnancy.”

Laura is panting – heavily and rapidly. She begins to hyperventilate. Her face is filled with fear – appearing disoriented.

The nurse distracts her with a question.

“Ma’am, how long has it been since you conceived?”

Laura looks at her, bewildered. “Conceived!? Haven’t you been listening?” Tears stream down her cheeks. “I said, they RAPED ME!”

The doctor is listening intently, writing furiously – hanging on every word.

“How long ago was that, Laura?” he asks. “Calm down… Think…”

The staffers relax their hold on Laura as she gradually calms down.

She breathes steadily as the ketamine washes over her. Her excitement is so intense that the tranquilizer is only marginally effective.

Eventually, she is calm enough that the staff can help her sit. They prop her

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pillows up and help her face the doctor. She has become more agreeable, but she has trouble focusing on Dr. Abadie.

Laura's words drivel out in slow motion. "Ten, weeks ago… maybe more. In the Bahamas," she says, slurring her words. "I can't be sure…" she whispers. "So long ago…"

Dr. Abadie gathers his emotions.

"I would agree with that assessment. Your labs show a level of hCG hormone that would coincide with a first-trimester pregnancy. I suspected that when I saw your initial blood work – the day we admitted you. I didn't want to say anything until you were strong enough to have this conversation." He adjusts himself – clears his throat. "It seems you are plenty strong enough at this point," he says uncomfortably. "With your permission, I would like to do an ultrasound analysis on you this afternoon?" He adds, "If you feel up to it."

He gets up without waiting for her to respond.

Laura sits there in shock, processing all that has transpired.

"I guess it makes sense looking back." She stares blankly. "I have a daughter, you know? Back home in the States. She's all grown up." She smiles fondly. "Her name is Claire. She is a beautiful young woman. Smart, too!" Her eyes get misty. "She's… in college." Laura murmurs with pride.

Dr. Abadie listens as Laura recounts her story. She reflects on her tough exchanges with Claire – the reason she needed to go to sea.

The doctor nods.

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A pattern is emerging…

"She was an easy pregnancy. No real complications. Not like other women. I guess I was lucky… *We* were lucky," she says, correcting herself.

Everyone listens with keen interest.

"Claire didn't want me to go." She rolls her eyes, thinking back. "Neither did my mother… come to think of it." She laughs quietly. "They had their reasons – you know?" Her mind drifts. "Claire's an only child." She murmurs, voice trailing off. "We never had another." She can barely get the words out. "We… Martin…was my husband."

"Was, missus?" Nurse Aida asks, "He gone over then?"

Laura cannot bring herself to say it. She can only nod.

The words stick in her throat.

Then, Aida gets an odd look on her face.

Her eyes widen in fear.

"Handsome man, yes? Tall and dark?" She looks around the room. "Strong connection here!"

Laura is slow to react. "What? Yes. How did you know?"

"There is a reason he comes, missus!" Aida understands now. "He's protectin' you, Kōtuku! Strange forces at work here, lady." Then she warns her. "You take care!"

Aida gives the doctor a foreboding look – crosses herself multiple times.

Dr. Abadie listens to nurse Aida's warning. Something gives him pause.

"That's ridiculous," he says finally. He takes Laura's hand. "Don't listen to Aida.

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She's incurably superstitious!" he groans.

"Not so, mister! Aida knows what she sees. Strange business…"

Laura listens through the drugs.

"What did you see?" she asks.

Aida will not answer – visibly shaken. She sits in a nearby chair, wringing her hands – crossing herself repeatedly.

"Aida, tell me!" Laura demands.

"Nothing, ma'am." she says, looking down. "Nothing, mister," toward the doctor. She beats a hasty retreat from the room, with the staff close behind.

Laura looks at the doctor suspiciously.

"What is she talking about?" Her eyes narrow. "What are you keeping from me?" Laura watches the doctor lower his head.

Is it shame? Guilt?

Dr. Abadie comes clean. "It's just… well… Someone, *a man* who matches Aida's description was seen by my staff, including Nurse Aida and myself." Dr. Abadie shifts uncomfortably. "He was seen standing at the foot of your bed – that first night in the hospital," he stammers. "You were in terrible condition. Many of us didn't think you would recover from your ordeal." His tone softens. "Anyway, he appeared from time to time until your condition improved. Once you were out of danger, nobody saw him again."

Laura has a white-knuckle grip on the sheets as she listens to Dr. Abadie tell his secret. Her heart skips at the thought of Martin's ghost standing over her while she

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slept. The image makes her weep.

"I want to be clear, Laura. It's common for people to believe they see spirits in hospitals," he sighs. "You should not give it any real consideration." He jots a quick note on her chart. "How long ago did he die?" He asks compassionately.

"It's been nearly three years now." She sniffles. "I hadn't realized how much time had passed since his accident." She thinks back. "So much has happened since then."

Dr. Abadie proceeds cautiously.

"You know, how we handle grief is unique for different people, Laura. Perhaps you have not yet fully accepted… *Martin,* is it? Perhaps you have not fully processed his death. You have not had proper time to heal from such grief." He treads cautiously. "Perhaps hurling yourself out to sea was not the wisest thing you could have done under the circumstances."

He lets that prognosis simmer for a moment.

"We see plenty of seemingly sturdy folk come in here with trauma from seafaring. Folks having far less emotional baggage than you're carrying right now. Those folks weren't as fortunate – nature dealt many of them some terrible consequences."

Laura has no response. No one has been this candid with her in a very long time.

She can't help thinking about Claire.

Harsh words spoken in haste – accusations made.

The charged conversations with Charles and Alan… so long ago.

Those confrontations made her options feel limited.

Then there was Lillian…

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Doubt comes creeping in – the undertow she thought she'd outrun.

"Your bond with him appears strong. It's no wonder your subconscious has been troubling you." Dr. Abadie says, trying to sound sympathetic. "If his love for you was equally powerful, then it's no wonder you believe he's been watching over you – even in death." He backtracks. "If you believe such things, that is."

"Clearly, Nurse Aida does!" he says, looking over his shoulder.

"I don't know what to believe," Laura admits. "So many people have tried to tell me what's *best for me*. Pressuring me. Forcing me to accept life on *their terms*." She surges with determination. "But I know one thing." She gives Dr. Abadie a glare laced with fierce conviction.

"I WANT IT OUT OF ME!" she shouts.

Dr. Abadie concedes defeat for the moment.

"Okay, Mrs. Barrett. We can discuss this more when you have calmed down." Then he counters, "There's still time to determine the best course of action…"

"I won't change my mind, doctor! I was preyed upon by ruthless, brutal men. Now I find out that my attacker's appalling progeny is growing in my womb?" Her expression darkens. "Believe me when I tell you," raising a finger, "I will not carry the shame of that intrusion inside me." Tears return softly.

Dr. Abadie nods. "I understand. I truly do." His tone gets gentler. "In my culture, that is to say, *Polynesia*, abortion is strictly prohibited. It is only considered in extreme circumstances," he sighs. "Having said that, it is fortunate that you find yourself in Tahiti. Here, the matter is more broadly interpreted and allows for more

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liberal views."

He folds his arms.

"According to your labs, you are still within the acceptable time frame to execute such a procedure – in light of your situation." He heads for the door. Then, adds one more thing. "If, by this evening, it is still your wish to proceed with eliminating the pregnancy, I will set up the procedure as soon as possible."

Laura is finally able to calm down. While he has acquiesced to her demands, it is clear he was required to offer his opinions. She believes him – but she does not trust him completely.

As he exits the room, another pair of staffers enters her room to help Laura get settled down for a nap. "Try to rest now, ma'am. You're going to have a busy afternoon." One of them says.

"What kind of man is he?" she asks. "The doctor…"

One of them responds. "He's a good man, missus. I seen him help many people through tough times." She finishes adjusting Laura's bed linens and exits with her partner.

Laura sits, looking out the window – letting the warmth of the sun and the meds wash over her. The world seems unnaturally quiet, as if it is waiting for her to react.

No birds. No children playing.

Only the sensation of slow, steady breathing… and her beating heart.

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Laura is wheeled into an examination room and told to wait for the technician. The room is ice cold, like the sonogram machine that sits poised to indict her.

She sits with her burden.

She never imagined being in this position. Particularly if Martin were alive. The thought of extinguishing evidence of their love would never have crossed her mind. But this…

This is different. Unwelcome. Unclean.

The examiner enters with a cart containing jellies, sanitizers, and a variety of attachments. She helps Laura out of her wheelchair, and onto the examination table.

Laura looks over the supplies with cynicism.

"Tsk, tsk. How goes the inquisition, Torquemada?" she pokes.

The woman does not respond. Instead, she continues to work.

She wheels the cart over to the table and helps Laura undo her hospital gown. "There we go, ma'am. Just lie back and try to relax," she says, easing Laura into a reclined position. "This may feel a little cold at first." She smears a little jelly on the end of the probe and begins to rub it on Laura's abdomen. "Okay, let's get a look at your baby!"

"It's not my baby." Laura corrects her.

"Well, it's inside your belly," she sighs. "Let's just see how it's doing, shall we?"

"I don't care *how it is doing.* It's an *invasive species*. That's all," Laura mutters.

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The machine makes slurping and gurgling noises as the technician listens to the sounds inside the womb.

The noises make Laura want to wretch.

“It’s a life, Mrs. Barrett. It’s precious,” she says, focused on her task. “It’s remarkable, really. Even after all you’ve been through, your body carries on, doing what it was meant to do.”

The technician probes intently.

“I don’t need a lecture on morality, or the miracle of life.” She points to the monitor depicting the primordial creature. “That… *thing* represents an intrusion of my body. A breach of my rights as a woman. It is *evidence* of a *crime*. Ill-begotten. Violent. Nothing more.”

The tech continues to explore Laura’s insides. “Still, we must accept all that God provides for us. Nature must be obeyed. All life must be respected.”

“Nature almost killed me.” She studies the nurse’s expression. “How can you ignore that?” Laura’s eyes narrow. “What role do I play in all this? Do I warrant consideration? What about my choices?” Laura asks over a subtle rhythmic fluttering.

The examiner adjusts the volume of the machine.

Laura winces.

“Are you married, nurse?”

“No, ma’am.” She says somewhat embarrassed.

“So, no kids then?” Laura asks pointedly.

“It’s true, ma’am. I have not been blessed in that way.”

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Laura shifts her tone.

"Well, I do. A daughter. Consented upon and conceived out of love." She looks at the nurse with pity. "You may want to reserve judgment of me until you realize that nature is indifferent. You have no family. No children. We share no common experience except that we are both women. Prone to abuse and violence. You need to learn the difference between bearing a child out of love, and being raped." She points at the monitor again. "I hope you never have to bear the shame of the latter." Laura has made an impression on the younger woman – though not a good one.

The examiner frowns at Laura's assertions.

"I am sorry, ma'am. We should not be having this conversation. I didn't mean to get you excited. Try to relax. It is better for the machine."

"The machine? To hell with the machine. What about what's best for me?"

The tech tries to change the subject, employing a different kind of coercion.

"Here, let me turn the screen a little so you can see the images more clearly."

She shifts the machine so Laura can get a better look at the image.

Laura gazes with morbid curiosity at the being forming inside her.

She can't stop staring at one particular detail. A single black orb looking back at her through the screen – across a nightmarish void.

"That black spot – do you see it?" She points to the screen. "When you fish in the deep sea, the sharks follow your boat. They attempt to snatch the fresh catch off your line before you can reel it in. When they open their bloody maws to gulp your next meal, their eyes roll back in their heads – like it gives them pleasure to steal your vital

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sustenance. That black lens stares back at you – cold-blooded and cruel – as if to say, 'What you possess, I can take away – without fear or favor.' Nature can be ruthless. Deadly."

Laura looks away in disgust.

"The shark is a metaphor. People will steal your agency. Tell you what's moral – what's best – what's true," she sneers. "I'm sick and tired of all that. I've had enough. This is my life. MINE. I don't have to accept everything 'nature' sends my way." Laura points her finger.

"Not like this."

She swats the probe away from her stomach.

"We're done here. I want to go back to my room."

She covers her body with her gown.

"Tell Abadie, I want to speak with him!" Her voice is brittle. "I want answers."

The examiner huffs at Laura's aggressive tone. Packs up her gear.

"Very well, ma'am. As you say."



Laura is being wheeled unceremoniously back to her room.

They are passing the nurse's station when Dr. Abadie approaches with some news.

"Ah, Mrs. Barrett. How did it go in the ultrasound suite?" he asks dryly.

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“About as well as I expected,” she smirks. “Your technician was very generous with her opinions. I didn’t learn much, but she certainly did raise a lot of questions.”

“Oh? I see. Have you reached a decision concerning the procedure then?”

She looks up at him – his pathetic expression of hope.

“Do you see? I’m afraid I was neither moved, nor contrite – but nice try. How soon can we proceed?”

He looks disappointed. “I had hoped the ultrasound would change your mind.” He frowns. “That is unfortunate.”

“Really? For who?” She shakes her head. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter,” she scoffs. “I got her spirited lecture complete with sound effects.” She takes a measured breath. “Look, if the procedure is legal on this island, then I want it scheduled – immediately. I am done *negotiating*.”

With resignation, Dr. Abadie reveals a compromise.

“I was afraid you might feel this way. So, I took the liberty of calling in a specialist from Fiji. He will be here this afternoon to perform the procedure as you have requested. It’s outside my purview, so I will stand by to assist with any other services you may require… outside of the actual procedure.”

Laura is shocked. “You’re recusing yourself?”

“I’m standing by,” he corrects her.

“A conscientious objector? Convenient.” Laura observes his body language.

“You see, Doctor? Having a choice can feel very liberating, don’t you agree?” She jabs him once more. “Enjoy your view from that high ground!”

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“I’ll see you after the arrangements have been concluded, Mrs. Barrett.” He counters her remark with one of his own. “I hope, in time, you can live with my decision.”

“Oh, I will. In fact, I’ll do more than that. I’ll be all-the-better for making my own decisions. Despite any lame assertions.”

Laura looks away – disgusted. She is going to get the help she needs – one way or another. For all his circumspection, he has served his purpose.

With that, the candy stripper wheels her back into her room, and into bed.

“Your nurse will be in shortly to administer the pre-op medications,” he says.

Laura fires back out of frustration.

“No more drugs! Let’s just get it done!”



The next morning, Laura is awakened early.

The day-nurses file in to take her vitals, serve her breakfast, and get her discharge paperwork organized.

“What’s all this?” she asks, still groggy from the anesthesia. “Where is Aida?”

“These are your discharge papers, ma’am.” The tone is chilly. “Aida is off shift.”

“Discharge? Am I well enough to leave? Where’s the doctor?” she demands.

The other nurses go about their business – avoiding eye contact. They do not

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want to engage with her. The shift nurse speaks up.

“Dr. Abadie has been called away to deal with a pair of new trauma cases that came in last night.” She looks at Laura with skepticism. “Another *boating* accident.” Her sentiment is critical.

“He expresses his best wishes for your speedy recovery, and has scheduled you for a follow-up appointment in three to four weeks. You may check-in at the front desk when you report. If there are no complications, you will be cleared to resume your journey at that time.” She hands Laura the paperwork.

“Will there be anything else, ma’am?”

Laura is incensed by this. “Oh, no that will be quite enough,” she says wryly. “So, it’s to be the old ‘heave-ho’ is it?”

The nurse responds defensively.

“With respect, ma’am, we have a lot of responsibilities here. We have cared for you to the best of our ability, despite your objections, and you appear to be recovering exceptionally well,” she sighs. “Now it is time to move on to other patients who need our help. We do not wish to be inhospitable, but we do need this bed.” There is an air of finality to her tone.

“Yes. It would appear beds are in short supply.” She fumes but decides to drop it. “I suppose it’s for the best. My journey won’t end in judgment.”

“Excuse me, ma’am?” the nurse asks.

Laura sighs. Then, quotes a few lines from her favorite poem; giving it her own interpretation. Gazing out the window, she recites the verse by heart.

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"The *sea* is beautiful, dark, and deep. But, I have many promises to keep. Aye, many *leagues* to *cross* before I sleep."

The nurses pause for Laura's inflection.

"That's beautiful, ma'am. Are those your own words?" one of them asks.

Laura smiles at the irony. "No. It's a poem – re-envisioned. From a book I have onboard my boat. It has kept me company over many hard-earned miles of open sea. My husband gave it to me…" eyes misting fondly.

She observes the blank look on the nurse's face.

It's clear she doesn't know the context.

"It's about… death." Laura informs her.

For a brief moment, Laura seems to delight in the nurse's ignorance.

The girl directs her gaze to the floor out of embarrassment. Quickly, she finishes her work before making for the door.

Laura stops her.

"Yes, ma'am? I'm sorry," the nurse says without lifting her eyes.

"No… I am. Thank you for all you have done." Laura struggles to meet her gaze. "Thank the doctor for me as well. Please?"

Flustered, she nods and leaves in a rush.

Laura moves to the window.

It's a beautiful day.

The seabirds are back, their cries filling the air.

"Perhaps it's a good idea to leave quickly – away from the anguish in this place." She

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craves real sleep – the kind that doesn't involve dehydration, drugs, or ghostly ships passing in the night.

"Enough already," she says to herself.

"I need my boat back…"

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