4

Boreas Box-17

Yuwinn Kraukamp

Her anxious emerald eyes stared through the snow-speckled porthole to her left, and leered at the white, wintery hell on the other side of the glass. The Antarctic landscape seemed more alive and incensed today, as if the frozen wilderness out there knew something September didn't. But should have.

"I came on this research expedition for the same reasons as all of you," she said to the men and women staring up at her. To the group of glaciologists, marine biologists and climatology students that breathed in her every word. "For the same dream."

Commanding and supervising a group of individuals from different nations and different fields, was unfamiliar territory to September. Her element was the lab-ice-breaking cleaver in hand, algae beneath her microscope, and a Frank Ocean playlist in her ears.

"Twelve months ago, we launched twenty Boreas boxes into the marginal ice zone all around us. And these data-capturing boxes, thanks to our mechanics from UCT, have been doing deep-sea scans and observations of the atmospheric effects that the sea-ice pancakes in this zone have had on the ocean's chemistry. And the good news is that it worked," September proudly announced to scattered applause.

"Seventeen has been relaying very, very promising data. And that valuable, atmospheric data will allow us to build more accurate

climate-change algorithms, capable of predicting snowstorms, heatwaves and other environmental catastrophes months in advance," she said with unmistakable hopefulness. "So, everything we've been working towards for months, everything we need to save as much of this world as we can … is in box seventeen."

The beautiful brunette's voice deepened when she revealed the real reason she had summoned them all into this briefing room: "The bad news, however, is that box seventeen is not retrievable at the moment. As you all know, we have a sea-diving drone that's designed to go down there and collect the Boreas boxes, but for the last few days, we haven't been able to pick up box seventeen's locator beacon, and the drone needs that signal to find number seventeen."

The group immediately became rattled and panicked as desperation and doubt filtered through the room.

"The box's navigation system malfunctioned, but we all knew this mechanical difficulty could happen under these conditions," September continued to explain. "So, we're gonna have to manually reactivate the locator for the drone to retrieve box seventeen."

"Manually?" asked an agitated engineer. "You mean, someone will have to reactivate the beacon by hand? One of us, I'm guessing?"

"Yes," September sombrely replied.

"That's suicide! Even if we had the diving gear, or the training—which we don't—diving into that ice-cold water is suicide." The smart-ass naysayer wasn't saying anything September hadn't already considered.

And then came the million dollar question: "So who's crazy enough to do that?"

An unsettling silence swept through the room like a bad odour.

"As the leader of this expedition, all its problems are my responsibility, so … I'll do it," she said as persuasively as she could.

In that moment September chose bravery, and obligation over terror. In that moment she felt like the uncompromising eco-warrior she had come out here, to the icy edge of the Earth, to be. And boy did that moment feel good, until her eyes were drawn towards that snow-speckled porthole once again. Towards the icy hell, waiting on the other side.

***

No one in the room agreed with September's risky plan, especially Kasparow Cupido. He wore his dissent like a dark, heavy crown above his crow-black hair—a facial warning sign for anyone who dared to spark up a conversation with this broody-looking bastard. Unlike everyone else in that room, Kasparow doubted her plan for two very valid reasons: firstly, he was the on-board safety officer of this expedition. Secondly, and more complicatedly, he was September's ex.

Kasparow waited at the back of the briefing room for the beanie-clad group of scientists to return to their stations, and once the last boot had cleared the room, he slowly approached September.

"Are you insane?" he asked under his breath. "You know damn well those diving suits weren't designed for those depths." His voice rose with fierceness, "The water pressure alone will rip your suit apart." And rose again, ultimately breaking: "And then the freezing temperatures down there will crush every nerve in that body of yours." After all these years, after their pain and plummeted vows, Kasparow still cared for her. "September, you could—"

"—I know," she whispered. "I know what could happen."

Kasparow's confoundedness bled into rage: "Then WHY—THE HELL—are you doing it?"

"Because someone has to," she said determinedly. "Because it's the right thing to do," she said, knowing full well that she was speaking to the angry, hopeless part of Kasparow that never understood why she would risk her life for any theoretical hope.

"There's a reason we send a drone, a machine, into that seawater and not people. People can't survive down there. You're not a bloody white walker, September. PLEASE … just … just ask the mechanic to do some McGyvering and fix the damn drone!"

"The drone isn't broken, Kaspar," she gently corrected him. "It can only find box seventeen if the locator beacon is active. Without that beacon, the drone's navigational system will be useless—entirely blind beneath all those ice pancakes. A machine won't save us this time."

"You're throwing your life away. And for what? For who?"

"For the world! The data gathered in that box down there could help us create more precise weather-predicting modules, which would help us remedy so much of this climate crisis. Think about the droughts, and the storms, and the agricultural horrors that we'd be able to prevent with a module like that. Think about the thousands of people back home that we'd be able to help." She tempted his dark soul with her undying hopefulness. "But it all starts with the sea-ice data in that box. Box seventeen is how we begin to save the world."

"Maybe the world doesn't want to be saved," he whispered, dejection vibrating through his voice and glimmering behind his ink-black eyes. "I mean, look around you! The planet is burning as we speak, and the majority of humanity doesn't give a single shit! They're too busy posting TikTok videos, exploiting each other, and plainly killing one another, even as we stare down the barrel of the gun. So maybe … maybe the world doesn't deserve to be saved. Maybe we never did."

Her heart shattered for him. "You don't believe that, Kaspar. You can't."

"No," he shook his head. "No. You don't get to tell me what I can and can't believe anymore. Those days, of you making assumptions about what's inside my soul … about whether I have one at all, are over."

"I know you lost your faith in this world, but I also know there's a part of you that still cares, Kasparow. The part that still believes in people—in this world. I've seen it." She reached forward and pressed her fingertips against his chest. "I've touched it. You became a safety officer for a reason. Keeping people safe is what you do, Kaspar. You're a saviour, like me."

"No, I'm not," he grimly disagreed. "My job requires me to envision the hundreds of ways that do-gooders like you can get themselves killed in rainforests, and deserts, and frozen wildernesses like the one out there! When you look at Antarctica, you might see some beautiful ecosystem to study, but my job is to prepare for the worst-case scenarios. For the infections and the viruses. The food shortages and the engine failures that lead to a sinking ship. I have

to see all the disasters; all the ways Antarctica can kill you. And make no mistake, September, everything out there wants to fucking kill you!"

"If you truly believe that, then why come along?"

"Because I'm getting a proper pay-cheque. And because … you asked."

"Right," she murmured. "Isn't risking one life, to spare generations, a worthy risk?" She paused for an answer she wouldn't get, then, "I'm diving at dawn."

***

Each time September closed her eyes that night, she was startled awake by the suffocating feeling of water entering her lungs. That her bed had turned into an iron sarcophagus, sinking to the bottom of the sea. She splashed her weary face with water and stared at herself in the bathroom mirror with eyes that could burn holes through her own reflection.

"You can do this," she quietly encouraged herself. "These are just nerves … that's all. There's a reason you were chosen to lead," she reminded herself aloud.

September gulped down cup after cup of coffee until her alarm clock went off, and the moment of truth arrived. She marched through the grey hallways with her most convincing game face, masking her frightened features. September hardened herself with every step to keep her fear from ripping her innards apart. She reached the equipment room, and the moment she stepped inside she immediately sensed that something was very wrong. The shelf where the bright-orange diving suits were hung was disheveled. And when she took a closer look, she noticed that of the four suits, one was missing.

She rushed to the exit leading to the ship's deck, and the instant she looked through the porthole at the top of the metal door, all her fears were confirmed: she saw a large man, fully clothed in a diving suit, standing on the deck. She couldn't see his face, but knew with agonising clarity it was Kasparow.

Like a woman possessed, September banged her fists on the steel door he had locked from the outside. “KASPAR! KASPAROW!” She screamed. “LOOK AT ME!”

Kasparow turned his head and looked at her, briefly, before turning away again and walking towards the edge of the icebreaker. Kasparow had hoped to be in the water before September got to the equipment room, before she had a chance to try and stop him, making this harder than it already was. Unfortunately for him, September was a stubborn and determined woman. Remembering that the suits have an internal communications network, she ran back to the equipment room.

She grabbed the helmet of the first suit and brought the microphone to her mouth. When September switched on the comms system, she immediately heard Kasparow’s heavy breathing through the earpiece.

“Kaspar,” she called out to him. “What are you doing?”

In truth, September knew exactly what he was attempting: he was trying to protect her by taking her place.

“What the hell are you doing?” she asked desperately.

“I’m gonna reactivate the locator beacon,” he said through his own microphone. “I’m gonna try to be a saviour. Like you said.”

“But you’re not a saviour. That’s what you said.”

“No, I’m not. But I think you are.”

“I don’t need you to save me, Kaspar. I’m not some damsel in distress. I’m the leader of this group, and I’m perfectly capable of reactivating that signal an—”

“—I know you can. But going into this water was always gonna be life or death,” he said as he stared down at the deep, black waters before him. “Not every life is equally valuable. Mine, for example, isn’t. But yours, September … the world can’t afford to lose your intellect, your research and your annoying ability to always do the right thing. It can’t afford to lose your heart.”

“You’re breaking mine right now, Kaspar,” she tearfully confessed.

“I know,” he breathed out. “I’m sorry.”

Kasparow placed his boot on the railing, and prepared to dive in. But before he did, he needed to say goodbye in his own way. “You

should know that um … that I loved you," he said, raw with regret. So many regrets.

"If you love me, why do this?"

Kasparow hoisted himself onto the railing, suspending his whole body right on the very edge.

"Because it was never enough," he answered her, and dived in.

September ran back to the porthole, just in time to see Kasparow's body disappear beneath the icy surface. She watched the sea swallow his entire figure in an instant, as if he had never been there. Through that ice-coated glass she watched, feared and wondered if the sea would ever give him back to her.