

DEAD WAKE ON THE BOREALIS

A North Sea Mystery

Book One of the Nordic Horizon Series

FINN HAWKINS

Copyright

Dead Wake on the Borealis

A North Sea Mystery / Book One of the Nordic Horizon Series

Author: Finn Hawkins

ISBN: to be assigned

Cover design: Finn Hawkins

Publishing platform: Bookmundo

Copyright © 2026 Finn Hawkins. All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, ships, shipping companies and events are either products of the author's imagination or have been adapted for literary purposes. Any resemblance to actual persons, companies, ships or events is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

Blurb

The MS Borealis is a ship of light, glass and courteous perfection - carrying its guests in luxury from Hamburg across the North Sea and around the British Isles. For Lukas Dorn and Elena Rost, both former cruise professionals and now a couple, the voyage is meant to be one thing above all: their first real holiday after years at sea.

Yet from the moment they board, both sense that something is moving beneath the polished rhythm of shipboard life. When the first dead man is found on board in an eerily staged pose, the legend of the kelpie appears to have stepped suddenly into the everyday life of the ship. More clues soon follow: vanished identities, manipulated routes, false uniforms and further deaths that expose a path towards a far older truth.

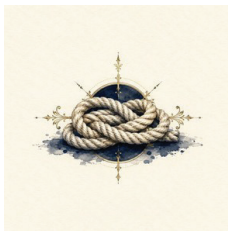
From Invergordon in the fog and Greenock in the rain to Liverpool's wet quays, Southampton's discreet exchanges and Hamburg, where the final door is opened, a maritime mystery unfolds beneath a Nordic sky and a dark horizon - aboard a ship that has itself become an accomplice to its secrets.

About the Author

Finn Hawkins writes atmospheric thrillers with a maritime soul, a dark horizon and a particular instinct for the quiet violence of closed systems.

His stories bring together Nordic landscapes, psychological precision and the hidden machinery of life on board, creating a distinctive voice poised between crime fiction and maritime suspense.

Dead Wake on the Borealis opens the Nordic Horizon series, following Lukas Dorn and Elena Rost, two former cruise professionals who investigate where water, routes and lines of power converge.



Contents

Chapter 1: The Weight of Steel.....	12
Chapter 2: Sailing Weather.....	36
Chapter 3: Night Watch.....	62
Chapter 4: The Sign of the Kelpie.....	83
Chapter 5: The Official Silence.....	98
Chapter 6: Blind Spots.....	115
Chapter 7: The Jade Orchid.....	129
Chapter 8: Underworld.....	144
Chapter 9: Pressure Line.....	159
Chapter 10: The Door Without a Name.....	172
Chapter 11: Invergordon in the Fog.....	185
Chapter 12: The Man from the Quay.....	198
Chapter 13: Beneath Green Hills.....	212
Chapter 14: Greenock in the Rain.....	225
Chapter 15: The Skin in the Wardrobe.....	239
Chapter 16: Foreign Tides.....	253
Chapter 17: The Threads Draw Tight.....	259
Chapter 18: Liverpool Calling.....	264
Chapter 19: The Second Victim.....	270

Contents - continued

Chapter 20: Shadows in the Atrium.....	275
Chapter 21: The Third Line.....	282
Chapter 22: Southampton Transfer.....	287
Chapter 23: False Skins.....	293
Chapter 24: The Raven Test.....	298
Chapter 25: Before the Audience Falls Silent.....	304
Chapter 26: Before First Light.....	310
Chapter 27: Final Performance.....	317
Chapter 28: No Curtain.....	324
Chapter 29: Hamburg under Leaden Skies.....	331
Chapter 30: After the Wake.....	338
Chapter 31: Rain Protocols.....	345
Chapter 32: The Fourth Archive.....	355
Chapter 33: Between Land and Water.....	364
Chapter 34: Black Water.....	372
Chapter 35: The Fourth Horizon.....	381
Chapter 36: What the Sea Keeps.....	390
Chapter 37: The Origin in the Fog.....	400
Chapter 38: Epilogue: Aurora.....	409

Dramatis Personae

Lukas Dorn: a former cruise professional; sharply observant, dry and analytical.

Elena Rost: a former Guest Services specialist; calm, precise and an unerring judge of people.

Elias Thorne: Chief of Security aboard the MS Borealis; professional, increasingly torn between duty and truth.

Marla Stein: Senior Guest Services Supervisor; composed and resilient.

Dr Beatrice Lehnert: guest lecturer on mythology and maritime culture.

Julian Thorne: a young restaurant employee and Elias's brother; frightened, but possessed of crucial observations.

Nadine & Pavel: Entertainment Support crew, cross-rostered between The Jade Orchid, the theatre and the costume store; poised on the boundary between knowledge and complicity.

Adrian Cole: a senior shipboard manager with access to discreet special routes.

Ingrid Voss: Chief Purser, with a past in the cruise line's shadow systems.

Mr Vogel: an older passenger, fond of liquorice, disagreeably clever and a gifted observer.

Ruben Harker: process architect, perpetrator and accuser of an old order.

Marion Falk (formerly Mira Falk): the medical witness to a much older operation - the displaced fourth line.

Dramatis Personae - continued

Jonas: a young waiter whose initially fearful observations later become crucial.

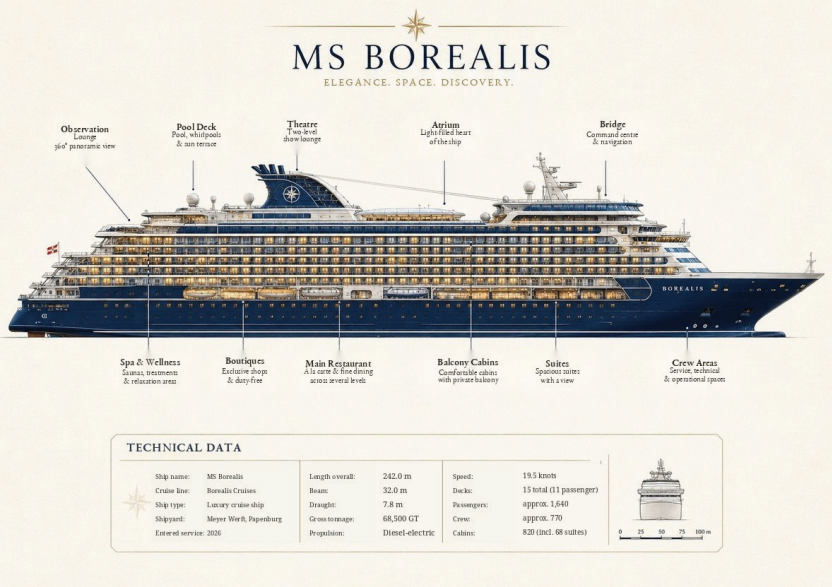
Henrik Sunder: administrator of old systems, master of polished language and belated concealment.

Route & Ports



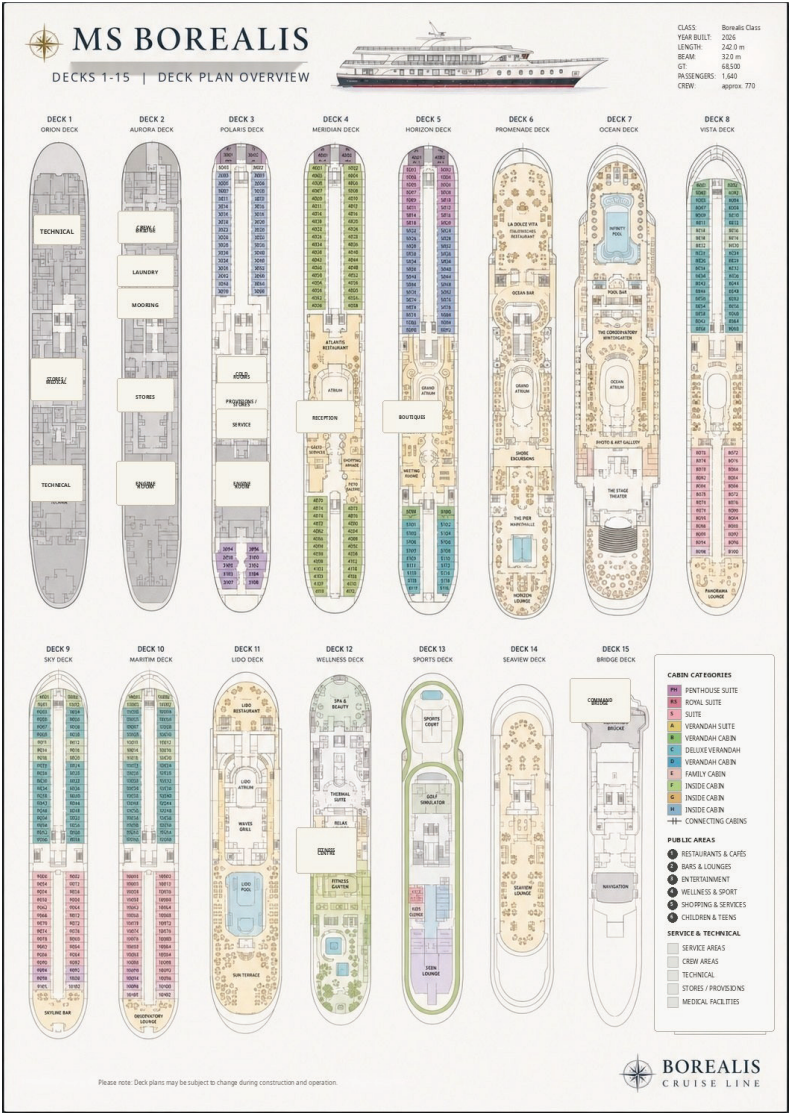
Route of the Borealis voyage: Hamburg - sea day - Invergordon - Greenock - sea day - Liverpool - Southampton - sea day - Hamburg.

The MS Borealis - Ship Profile



Ship profile of the MS Borealis.

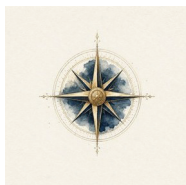
Deck Overview



Complete overview of Decks 1-15 aboard the MS Borealis.

Chapter 1

The Weight of Steel



The first thing Lukas Dorn noticed was the smell.

Not the river, although the Elbe lay beyond the glass frontage, dark and restless beneath a sky the colour of bruised lead. Nor the diesel, although no cruise terminal in Hamburg could entirely shut out the deep industrial breath of tugs, ferries and supply vehicles. What reached him first as he wheeled his suitcase through the automatic doors was the peculiar mixture found only on embarkation day: wet wool coats, overheated bodies, printer toner, coffee in cardboard cups, perfume layered over travel fatigue - and beneath it all, the metallic patience of a ship waiting to swallow people.

He stopped just inside the entrance.

Behind him, the doors closed against the wind with a quiet sigh. Ahead, several hundred passengers moved through the hall in nervous currents, drawn towards check-in desks, baggage drop, security screening and the bright, practised smiles of uniformed staff. Banners hung from steel girders above the hall, promising tranquillity, space, wellness and discovery. The photographs showed open water beneath impossible sunlight. They showed whisky glasses before panoramic windows, empty spa pools,

smooth white beds, cliffs without rain, Scotland without midges and a ship that apparently existed without a working crew.

Lukas looked past the banners.

Through the rain-smeared glass wall, the MS Borealis lay alongside the pier.

She was larger than she had appeared in the booking photographs. Ships were always larger. On a screen, they became objects: hull, decks, funnel, bridge. At the quayside, they became weather. The Borealis rose from the harbour basin in layered bands of dark steel and pale superstructure, her rows of balconies like a city carved into a cliff. Her bow pointed downriver with a stillness that seemed almost arrogant. Lines thicker than a man's arm held her to the bollards. Service vehicles moved around her hull like insects around a sleeping animal.

A beautiful ship, the brochure had called her.

Lukas did not disagree. Beauty and menace had never been mutually exclusive.

Beside him, Elena Rost removed her gloves one finger at a time, slowly enough for the movement to look elegant rather than practical. She followed his gaze towards the ship and said nothing for a moment. Rain tapped against the terminal roof. Somewhere nearby, a child began to cry because a helium balloon had slipped free of its wrist strap and risen into the unreachable steelwork above the hall.

'Don't even start,' Elena said.

Lukas looked at her. 'I haven't said anything.'

'You don't need to.'

With the smallest nod, she indicated his face, using the calm precision that had once made even experienced officers lower their voices without knowing why. Elena had spent years at sea turning chaos into queue tickets and apologies into compensation letters. She could read a lobby before entering it; a family dispute before the first voice was raised; a lie before the second sentence. With Lukas, she needed even less.

'You're already counting the gangway staff,' she said. 'You checked the camera above the baggage belts before you looked at the ship. You're wondering why the left-hand security lane is closed when passenger flow is clearly above forecast. And in about ten seconds, you're going to tell me the man at desk twelve is using the wrong ink pad.'

Lukas looked across the hall.

The man at desk twelve was indeed using the wrong ink pad.

'It's not my fault things are visible,' he said.

Elena gave him a look that belonged in a complaint meeting at Guest Services: patient, courteous and lethal. 'We're on holiday.'

'So I've been informed.'

'We paid for this voyage.'

'I remember the pain.'

'We're not crew. We're not consultants. We are not helping anyone optimise anything. We are passengers.'

The word hung between them like an ill-fitting costume. Passengers.

Lukas had repeated it to himself several times since the taxi crossed the Elbe bridges. Passengers were allowed to be late. Passengers were allowed to ask where the buffet was while standing directly in front of the sign. Passengers were allowed to complain about the weather, pillows, sea conditions, coffee strength, excursion stickers, theatre seats, balcony neighbours and the mysterious global conspiracy preventing suitcases from appearing in cabins precisely eight minutes after boarding. Passengers were allowed to be unreasonable because the ship had been built to absorb their unreasonableness and call it service.

Former crew did not become passengers merely by paying an invoice.

They carried the other ship inside them.

The one beneath the carpets.

The one with coded doors and crew stairwells, with too little sleep and fluorescent light, with managers who ate standing up, with laundry cages that rolled through the I-95 corridor like freight trains, with radios spitting broken English at two in the morning, with a crew mess smelling of rice, fryer oil and homesickness. The ship on which every public smile carried a private cost.

Elena stepped closer and lowered her voice. 'Lukas.'

He turned fully towards her.

She wore a dark wool coat, simple and perfectly cut, her hair pinned back against Hamburg's damp wind. There was anticipation in her face, but cautious anticipation, as though she did not yet trust it. The voyage had been her idea. Scotland in November, she had said, because normal people

went when the sky was blue and coaches clogged every castle. They wanted the other Scotland. Rain on stone. Harbours beneath low cloud. Whisky in small rooms. The Highlands half concealed. A ship leaving Hamburg not as a workplace, but as a beginning.

Their first proper holiday.

The words had sounded harmless when she said them.

Now, in the terminal, with the Borealis beyond the glass, they sounded like a challenge.

'I know,' Lukas said quietly. 'Don't scan.'

'I didn't say that.'

'You implied it.'

'I said don't start. There's a difference.'

That made him smile, and because he smiled, she allowed herself to do the same. For a brief moment, the noise of the hall receded from them. Then a baggage trolley struck Lukas's suitcase with a hollow plastic crack.

'Sorry! I'm sorry, truly!'

The woman behind the trolley was small, breathless and wrapped in a red raincoat still beaded with water. Two suitcases, a rucksack, a duty-free bag from somewhere she had clearly not visited that day and a folding walking stick were balanced badly on the trolley. A man of roughly the same age stood behind her, studying a printed boarding pass with the helpless fury of someone who believed paper had betrayed him personally.

'We've got Priority,' he announced to the crowd. 'It says Priority.'

Elena's face changed so subtly that only Lukas would have noticed. Holiday Elena vanished. Guest Services Elena appeared, fully dressed and armed.

'May I?' she asked, already reaching for the boarding pass without making the movement feel like an intrusion.

The man handed it over at once. People did that with Elena. They mistook her composure for authority and her authority for permission.

'You do have Priority,' she said. 'But this entrance is for baggage drop only. Your check-in zone is B, just beyond the blue sign. Can you see the member of staff with the silver scarf?'

The couple looked.

'She'll help you. Keep the walking stick out, please, not in the suitcase. Security will want to examine it separately. And have your passports in your hands before you reach the desk, rather than in the front pocket of the trolley case.'

The woman blinked. 'Do you work here?'

'No,' Elena said pleasantly. 'I've merely survived places like this.'

The woman laughed in relief without quite knowing why, then pushed the trolley towards Zone B. Her husband followed, still mistrustful of the boarding pass but now moving in the correct direction.

Lukas watched them go. 'You lasted four minutes.'

'She was about to cry.'

'You enjoyed it.'

'I prevented avoidable suffering. That's different.'

'No, it isn't.'

Elena pressed the handle of her suitcase into his hand. 'Check-in. Before I reorganise the entire terminal.'

They joined the Priority queue, which moved with the broken rhythm of every embarkation process: sudden progress, inexplicable standstill, three members of staff gathered over one passport, then movement again. Around them, people performed the small rituals that preceded a cruise. They checked the same documents repeatedly. They weighed hand luggage with their eyes. They pretended not to hear which cabin categories other people had booked. They complained about the wait, although the queue had barely existed six minutes earlier.

Lukas let the voices pass around him.

A honeymooning couple behind them whispered about upgrading their drinks package. A retired teacher ahead told her sister she did not trust ships with dark hulls. Two men in outdoor jackets argued over whether Invergordon was close enough to Loch Ness to justify the excursion. A teenager watched a video without headphones until his mother hissed his full name in a tone that silenced three rows.

Normal embarkation sounds.

And yet.

There was a tension in the staff that passengers did not notice. Lukas saw it first in the check-in agents: smiles held half a second too long, glances towards supervisors, hands working quickly but without rhythm. He saw a terminal coordinator speaking into a radio behind a pillar, shielding her mouth with the back of her clipboard. He saw a ship's officer near the gangway entrance read a message on his

telephone and become as still as though someone had thrown a switch.

No panic.

Not yet.

But pressure.

Elena saw him looking and followed his gaze.

'Operational issue,' she said quietly.

'Perhaps.'

'Delayed baggage loading?'

'Possible.'

'Missing crew?'

He did not answer at once.

At the far end of the hall, half hidden behind a group of passengers photographing themselves with the ship in the background, a young crew member in a white shirt stood beside a door marked STAFF ONLY. He was doing nothing visibly wrong. That was precisely what made him conspicuous. Crew moved through terminals with purpose: directing, lifting, checking, smiling, apologising. This one stood too still. His phone was pressed to his ear, but he was not speaking. He was listening.

Then he turned his head and looked directly at Lukas.

For one second only.

Then he opened the crew door and disappeared.

Elena's voice was calm. 'You saw that.'

'Yes.'

'Do we know him?'

'No.'

'Did he know us?'

Lukas watched the crew door swing shut. 'I don't know.'

The queue moved forward.

The check-in agent who greeted them had the immaculate exhaustion of someone three hours into a process with another six still to run. Her name badge read MAREN. She was young, perhaps twenty-three, and wore the professional friendliness she had been taught but life had not yet hardened.

'Good afternoon, and welcome to Nordic Horizon Cruises,' she said. 'May I have your passports, please?'

Elena placed both passports on the counter, precisely parallel.

Maren scanned them. Her smile remained in place while the system loaded. Lukas watched the screen reflected in her eyes. There was a delay. Not a long one. Long enough.

Maren clicked once. Then again. Her smile flickered.

'Is there a problem?' Elena asked gently.

'No, not at all.'

The lie was tiny. Almost automatic. Not malicious. A service lie.

Elena heard it anyway.

Maren reached for the telephone beside the keyboard, but stopped before touching it. She looked past Lukas towards the supervisor station. The supervisor, a broad woman in a dark-blue blazer, was already looking back. Something passed between them: a question withheld, an instruction remembered.

Maren lowered her eyes to the screen again. 'I only need to confirm your onboard account.'



Hamburg before embarkation - the threshold between land, rain and ship.

Lukas leaned slightly towards the counter, not enough to be rude. 'First voyage with Nordic Horizon. Perhaps the system is punishing us.'

Maren laughed too quickly. 'Never. We're delighted to have you on board.'

She printed the cruise cards. The machine clicked plastically and released two rectangles of white and dark

blue. Maren slid them into a small folder containing a deck plan, restaurant information and instructions for the muster drill.

'Cabin 9062,' she said. 'Deck 9, port side, forward-midships. Your luggage will be delivered during the afternoon. Please proceed through security and then follow the signs to the gangway. Cabins are officially available from fifteen hundred, but yours is already ready.'

Elena's eyebrow moved almost imperceptibly.

Cabin already ready.

On embarkation day, that meant luck, status or intervention.

'Thank you, Maren,' Elena said.

Maren looked up sharply when Elena used her name. Another small detail. Another reaction filed away.

They moved towards security.

'Cabin released early,' Lukas said.

'Yes.'

'System delay.'

'Yes.'

'Supervisor watching.'

'Yes.'

'You're doing it too.'

'I never said I wasn't.'

Security was efficient, though not elegant. Bags travelled through the X-ray machine. Passengers forgot coins, belts, telephones, water bottles, scissors, corkscrews and the emotional fact that metal detectors detected metal. A man in a quilted gilet tried to explain that his pocketknife was

traditional. A security officer explained that tradition did not alter blade length. Behind them, the retired teacher who distrusted dark hulls asked whether the ship had enough lifeboats.

Then came the gangway.

For passengers, a gangway is a tunnel of anticipation. For crew, it is a border. Lukas felt that border in his body the moment his foot touched the ribbed metal floor. The terminal air remained behind them. The ship's air waited ahead.

Halfway across, Elena slowed.

The Elbe wind pressed against the gangway panels, making the structure tremble almost imperceptibly. Through the narrow windows, Hamburg lay wet and grey beyond the pier: cranes, warehouses, water, traffic, gulls in the wind. Ahead, the open shell door of the Borealis glowed warmly.

'All right?' Lukas asked.

Elena nodded, but her hand tightened around the handle of her cabin bag.

'I thought it would feel different,' she said.

'Being back on board?'

'Being back on board without belonging.'

He understood too well.

At the ship's entrance, a photographer tried to pose them in front of a backdrop showing the Borealis beneath a Mediterranean-blue sky. Elena stopped him with a look.

'No photograph, thank you.'

The photographer lowered his camera. 'Of course. Welcome aboard.'

Aboard.

The word did something to Lukas despite his resistance.

They crossed the threshold.

The ship took them in.

First warmth. Then pressure. That faintly sealed quality of conditioned air. The slight citrus note of the public areas, pumped invisibly through the ventilation. Beneath it, polished wood, carpet adhesive, coffee, flowers, cleaning chemicals and the deep vibration no designer could remove from a living ship. It came through the soles of his shoes and settled behind his ribs.

Home, said an old part of him.

No, he answered.

The embarkation lobby opened into the lower level of the Grand Atrium, and for a moment even Lukas allowed the ship its theatre. Three decks of space rose above them in glass, pale oak, brushed brass and dark-blue acoustic panels. A suspended sculpture of metal arcs floated beneath the ceiling like frozen northern lights. Soft piano music came from somewhere. Crew in immaculate uniforms stood at calculated points, smiling, directing, absorbing confusion.

The illusion was almost perfect.

Almost.

To the left, Guest Services was already under siege. A queue stretched away from the desk although boarding had scarcely begun. A family argued about connecting doors. A man wanted to know why his drinks package did not include a particular champagne. An elderly woman clutched her

handbag to her chest and kept repeating that her suitcase had a yellow ribbon, not a green one.

Elena stopped.

Lukas did not need to look at her to know what she saw. Too few agents. Wrong angle on the queue. No visible floor manager. New crew member at the left-hand terminal without support. Back-office door opening too often. Bad sign. If the Front Desk was already under pressure before sailing, something behind the scenes had already gone wrong.

'Elena,' he said.

'I'm admiring the atrium.'

'You're calculating desk coverage.'

'I can do both.'

A young officer crossed the atrium from the starboard corridor, moving quickly while trying not to look as though he was moving quickly. Hotel department, Lukas thought automatically. Not senior enough for genuine command confidence, too clean for Stores, too tense for routine. The officer bent towards the Guest Services supervisor and whispered something. The supervisor's expression did not change, which told Lukas the information was bad.

Then the officer looked at them.

Not by accident.

Lukas felt Elena register it beside him.

'That's the second,' she said.

'Yes.'

'Still on holiday?'

'For now.'

They moved on before either of them was tempted to follow old reflexes. The midships lifts were already full of passengers and luggage, so they walked forward along Deck 4, past closed boutique grilles, a silent champagne bar, the entrance to a speciality restaurant of black bamboo and amber glass, and a sign pointing towards the theatre.

Lukas noticed the restaurant's name as they passed.

The Jade Orchid.

Beside the entrance, a crew member in a white jacket spoke quietly with a man in dark overalls. Culinary and technical. Nothing unusual. Ships ran on conversations like that. Refrigerator alarm, blocked drain, ventilation fault, defective induction hob. The man in overalls wore a tool pouch at his waist and orange ear defenders clipped to his belt.

Elena noticed Lukas noticing.

'No,' she said.

'I haven't said anything.'

'You were about to become interested in a maintenance discussion outside an Asian restaurant.'

'That sounds very specific.'

'I know you.'

They reached the forward lifts. One arrived half full of passengers staring at the buttons as though the ship's vertical geography were a moral examination. A boy pressed Deck 14, Deck 12, Deck 9 and Deck 5 before his father stopped him. The lift rose slowly and stopped on almost every deck.

Deck 9 was quieter.

The corridor swallowed sound. Thick carpet underfoot, low ceiling, warm light, identical cabin doors in both directions. Passenger corridors always felt slightly unreal on embarkation day: too clean, too expectant, waiting for people to distribute their lives across beds and bathroom shelves.

Cabin 9062 was on the port side. Elena held her card to the lock. The reader flashed green.

The door opened with the heavy sigh of a fire boundary.

For a moment, neither of them went in.

It was a balcony cabin, premium standard, designed with the ruthless intelligence imposed by limited space. Bed facing forward, sofa beside the glass frontage, narrow desk, wardrobe with sliding doors, a bathroom compact enough to punish broad shoulders, carpet in muted grey-blue, walls finished in pale wood, lighting warm but controlled. Beyond the balcony door lay the terminal, the river and the black side of the hull below.

Elena entered first.

'Not bad,' she said.

'Which means you've already found three things wrong with it.'

'Two.'

'Only two?'

'The bed runner is slightly crooked, and the welcome letter is aligned towards the door rather than the guest's sightline on entering.'

'Catastrophic.'

'I've seen reputations damaged by less.'

Lukas set his suitcase beside the sofa and did what he had promised himself he would not do. He checked the balcony lock. Then the secondary catch. Then the door seal. Then the cover over the spyhole. Then the emergency information on the inside of the cabin door.

Elena watched him from the wardrobe.

'I know,' he said.

'I haven't said anything.'

'You breathed critically.'

'I breathed as a passenger.'

'No passenger breathes like that.'

She opened the wardrobe and found two lifejackets, laundry bags, slippers, a safe, hangers gripping the rail too tightly and a faint smell of new laminate. Then she inspected the bathroom with the same silent efficiency Lukas had applied to the balcony. It was not mistrust. It was muscle memory. Former crew inspected rooms because they knew rooms could betray people.

The daily programme lay on the desk.

Elena picked it up.

'Muster drill before sailing. Departure at nineteen hundred. Captain's welcome tomorrow. Sea day. Invergordon the morning after next.'

'Scotland,' Lukas said.

That softened her.

'Yes,' she said. 'Scotland.'

For a while, they allowed themselves the fiction.

They unpacked. Not completely - people who had lived at sea never unpacked completely in the first hour - but enough

to claim the cabin. Elena arranged toiletries with geometric precision. Lukas hung two shirts, placed a jumper in a drawer and took it out again because the drawer smelt faintly of furniture polish. Outside, luggage cages rolled along the corridor, wheels thudding over carpet joins. Cabin stewards knocked, greeted, disappeared. Somewhere, a child discovered the balcony and shouted that the ship was enormous.

At 16:30, the muster drill pulled them back into the machinery of cruising.

Their muster station was in the theatre.

The passengers arrived in waves: irritated, curious, obedient, some already carrying drinks they should not have brought, asking whether attendance was compulsory while standing beneath a sign explaining that attendance was compulsory. Crew scanned cards at the entrance. A video played. Lifejackets were demonstrated. The emergency signal sounded and startled several people despite the warning beforehand.

Lukas watched the crowd rather than the screen.

Elena watched the crew.

A muster drill is one of the few moments when a ship reveals its nervous system. Guest flow, language barriers, authority, signage, bottlenecks, reduced mobility, crew confidence - everything appears at once. The Borealis handled it well. Mostly.

Mostly was not entirely.

At the back of the theatre, the young crew member from the terminal stood beside an emergency exit. White shirt.

Food and Beverage, Lukas guessed. Dark hair, pale face, posture too rigid. When a supervisor spoke to him, he flinched before answering.

Elena leaned closer. 'The same one?'

'Yes.'

'Are we ignoring it?'

'That was the plan.'

'Bad plan.'

'Holiday plan.'

The crew member looked at them again.

This time there was no doubt.

He knew their faces.

Or someone had told him to look out for them.

After the drill, the ship began to gather itself for departure. The light outside deepened into blue. Hamburg's cranes became black geometry against the evening. The terminal released its final passengers. Mooring lines were prepared. The gangway was withdrawn. Somewhere deep within the ship, the note of the machinery changed.

Lukas and Elena stood with other passengers on the open promenade deck as the Borealis prepared to leave Hamburg.

Sail-away always possessed a peculiar honesty. Even people who had complained all afternoon fell silent when a ship began to move. Beneath the luxury, that first separation from land still carried something ancient: the knowledge that solid ground had been surrendered.

The bow thrusters woke with a vibration that travelled through the deck plates. Water boiled white against the pier.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the gap between ship and quay widened.

A woman beside Elena whispered, 'We're moving.'

As though astonished that a ship was doing what it had promised.

The Borealis glided into the Elbe.

Hamburg passed in wet lights: cranes, warehouses, office windows, bridges, the dark shoulders of moored ships, gulls above the wake. Passengers raised their phones. Crew watched with professional faces behind which private calculations were running: turnaround complete, luggage almost fully delivered, first dinner service approaching, bars close to peak demand, complaints travelling from the terminal towards Guest Services.

Elena rested her forearms on the rail.

For the first time that day, Lukas saw her relax.

'It's beautiful,' she said.

'Yes.'

'You're allowed to enjoy it.'

'I am enjoying it.'

'You look as though you're planning how to evacuate it.'

'That's how I enjoy things.'

She laughed, and the wind carried the sound away.

They remained outside until the cold drove most passengers back into the ship. By then, the city behind them had already thinned, the river had widened, and the industrial lights had grown fewer and more distant. The Borealis moved with increasing certainty towards the dark mouth of the North Sea.

They ate dinner in the main restaurant because Elena wanted to see the operation on its first evening. She called it curiosity. Lukas did not insult either of them by believing her.

The restaurant was a cathedral of controlled appetite: linen, glass, dark-blue chairs, pale wooden screens, subdued lighting, waiters balancing trays like offerings. At their table by the window, they ordered fish, a red wine neither of them liked and a dessert they shared because desserts at sea were always designed as acts of surrender.

Their waiter introduced himself as Julian.

White shirt. Dark hair. Pale face.

The young man from the terminal. The young man from the muster drill.

Elena smiled at him with flawless warmth. 'Good evening, Julian.'

His grip tightened on the wine bottle.

Only Lukas saw it.

Julian poured carefully. Too carefully. The neck of the bottle clicked once against the rim of Elena's glass.

'First contract?' Lukas asked.

Julian looked up. Fear crossed his face so quickly a passenger would have missed it.

'No, sir. Third.'

'Then you know there's no need to be nervous on embarkation night.'

Elena's foot touched Lukas's beneath the table. A warning. Gentle, but unmistakable.

Julian tried to smile. 'Embarkation is always... a lot.'

'It is,' Elena said. 'You're doing very well.'

The kindness struck him almost harder than a question.

For an instant, something tore in his professional mask. His eyes flicked towards the service doors, then to the upper level of the restaurant, where a man in a dark suit was speaking to the maître d'. Then the mask returned.

'I hope you have a pleasant evening,' Julian said.

He walked away too quickly.

Elena waited until he was out of earshot. 'That boy is terrified.'

'Yes.'

'Of us?'

'No.'

'Of someone in this room?'

'Perhaps.'

'Lukas.'

'I know.'

'We are not investigating because a frightened waiter looked at us twice.'

'No.'

But both of them knew the sentence carried no weight.

After dinner, they walked through the ship without calling it an inspection. Deck 5 with its shops, Deck 6 with the lounge, Deck 12 by the half-deserted pool in the cold, the softly lit spa entrance, the closed doors of the Kids' Club, the casino beginning to pulse with artificial night. The ship was still in its first evening performance: passengers discovering, crew smiling, officers appearing in visible

places, music changing with each venue, everything polishing itself over the exhaustion of turnaround.

Near the aft stairwell on Deck 11, they passed an elderly man in a beige windbreaker arguing with a cabin steward about coffee.

'I wake at half past four,' the man said. 'On a properly run ship, coffee is available when civilised people require it.'

The cabin steward smiled the smile of a man who had mentally left his body.

Elena slowed.

Lukas took her elbow. 'No.'

'He's about to go to Guest Services.'

'They'll survive.'

'He won't.'

'Neither will we if you adopt every operational problem before midnight.'

She allowed herself to be led on, albeit reluctantly. Behind them, the older man announced his cabin number into the corridor as though calling witnesses.

At 23:40, they returned to Cabin 9062.

The North Sea was beginning to make itself felt. Nothing dramatic. Not enough to trouble the passengers. Only a long, slow lift beneath the hull, followed by a rolling motion that made the hangers in the wardrobe click softly together. Beyond the balcony glass there was nothing but black water and, occasionally, a distant point of light.

Elena prepared for bed. Lukas stood outside in the cold on the balcony longer than necessary.

The ship moved through darkness.

Behind him, the cabin looked warm and small through the glass. Ahead, the sea took every sound and made it older.

He tried to name what was troubling him.

The delay in the check-in system. The cabin released early. The officer who had watched them in the atrium. The maintenance conversation outside The Jade Orchid. Julian's fear. The way he had looked towards the service doors. The irrational but persistent feeling that their names had reached the ship before they had.

None of it meant anything.

Together, it meant enough.

His telephone vibrated once in his pocket.

Unknown number.

At first, there was no text. Only an attachment symbol.

Then three words appeared.

YOU LEFT TOO SOON.

Lukas stared at the screen until the cold reached his fingers.

A second message followed.

ASK ABOUT THE WATER.

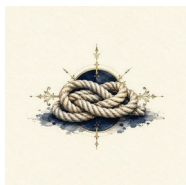
He turned towards the cabin. Elena stood inside, watching him through the glass.

She had already read his face.

And far below them, in a part of the ship no passenger would ever enter, a crew member with trembling hands opened a locked door and let the black smell of the sea into a room where seawater had no business being.

Chapter 2

Sailing Weather



The message did not disappear simply because Lukas stared at it for long enough.

It remained on the display, sober and bright, two short lines in the cold air of the balcony. YOU LEFT TOO SOON. ASK ABOUT THE WATER. No name. No greeting. No threat presenting itself as one. That was precisely why it felt worse than a threat. Someone on board knew he was there. Someone knew he was watching. And someone had decided that Lukas Dorn might be useful again.

Behind the glass, Elena opened the balcony door.

The wind reached into the cabin at once, cold and salty, moving the curtains like breath. The warmth inside took a step backwards. Elena wore a dark-blue jumper and had let down her hair; it made her face softer, but no less alert. She did not look at the sea. She looked at the telephone in his hand.

'Show me,' she said.

Lukas handed it to her.

She read the message once. Then a second time, more slowly. Her thumb did not move. She opened no details, contacts or settings. She did what she had once done at an

overcrowded Guest Services desk when a guest read out a complaint: she listened before reacting.

'Unknown number,' she said.

'Yes.'

'No spelling mistakes. No unnecessary words. No panic.'

'No request, either.'

'No.' She handed the telephone back. 'An instruction.'

The ship rose beneath them, slowly, like an animal in its sleep. Somewhere deep within the hull, a pump changed frequency. Above them, invisible in the night, radar revolved and sliced the darkness into circles.

'We're doing nothing,' Elena said.

Lukas looked at her.

'That was convincing,' he said.

'I'm practising.' She pulled the balcony door almost shut, leaving a narrow gap so the wind would swallow their voices. 'We haven't even been aboard for eight hours. A waiter seems nervous, an officer looked at us, and someone using an anonymous number sends you a line that sounds as though it came from a particularly bad murder-mystery dinner. That is not grounds for an investigation.'

'I didn't use the word investigation.'

'You don't need to. Your shoulders are using it.'

Lukas slipped the telephone into his coat pocket. 'What would you do if you were still on duty?'

'As Guest Services Manager?' Elena folded her arms, not against him but against the cold. 'I would check whether the message might have come from a guest, a crew member or an internal device. I would want to know whether anyone

else had received similar messages. I would ask my Front Desk whether anyone had enquired about us today. I would try not to let the matter become large before I knew whether it was a matter at all.'

'And as Elena?'

She looked out at the water. 'I would wonder why someone is writing to you and not to me.'

That was the sentence that remained suspended between them.

Because Elena was right. If a frightened crew member had recognised two former insiders aboard, he could have approached the woman who opened doors with a smile and made people talk. Whoever chose Lukas did not want comfort first. Whoever chose Lukas wanted analysis, traces, systems. Or guilt.

'The wording,' Lukas said after a while. 'Left too soon.'

'From dinner?'

'Possibly. We didn't really leave anywhere else.'

'We did.' Elena looked at him. 'The Jade Orchid. You saw the maintenance conversation, but I pulled you away.'

'That was during the day.'

'The message doesn't say when.'

Lukas did not answer.

He thought of the man in dark overalls, the orange ear defenders at his belt, the crew member's white jacket, the muted conversation outside the restaurant's amber doors. Such conversations were normal on a ship. That was precisely why they made good cover.

'Ask about the water,' Elena murmured. 'Not look in the water. Not follow the water. Ask about the water. That sounds as though there is a particular water someone ought to be able to discuss officially.'

'Ballast. Drinking water. Grey water. Black water. Pools. Sprinklers. Spa. Galley. Aquariums. Laundry. Cooling. Firefighting systems. Tender stations.' Lukas recited the list quietly, almost reluctantly. 'A ship is a hotel that is constantly fighting, moving, drinking, heating, cooling, cleaning, hiding and fearing water.'

'Very poetic.'

'Very operational.'

'And a great many ways to ruin a holiday.'

He did not smile.

Elena touched his forearm briefly. 'Lukas. Seriously. We're not going into crew areas at night. We're not hacking systems. We're not questioning crew members who already look overloaded on their first evening. If there is something, we'll see it without being stupid.'

'Agreed.'

'That was too quick.'

'I can agree more slowly, if you'd prefer.'

She closed the balcony door. The wind cut off, and the cabin became an artificially warm little room inside a vast body of steel once more. For a moment, there was only the quiet clicking of hangers and the deep singing of the machinery.

Elena laid the daily programme on the desk and placed her water glass precisely on its coaster. 'We're going for a walk.'

Lukas raised his eyebrows.

'Not investigating,' she said. 'Walking. As passengers. Two people with too much coffee and too little sleep.'

'With a destination?'

'Ship's air. Open decks. Perhaps tea. Perhaps we'll see whether Julian is still on duty. Perhaps I'll decide all of this is ridiculous and tomorrow you'll look obediently at Scotland.'

'That sounds almost like investigating.'

'No. It sounds like a rehearsal for marriage with poor impulse control.'

They took no coats, only their cruise cards. That was the first mistake ordinary passengers made at midnight: they confused the temperature indoors with the weather. Lukas took his coat anyway. Elena looked at him but said nothing. At sea, a person without a coat was a person who would shortly have to buy one.

The Deck 9 corridor lay in the muffled stillness that descended on passenger decks only after midnight. During the day, identical doors had something hotel-like about them, almost harmless. At night, they became locked possibilities. Behind every door, someone slept, argued, wept, drank too much, wrote home or forgot that walls aboard ships were thinner than walls ashore.

Muted laughter came from one cabin. The closing moments of a television programme from another. A room-

service tray stood outside 9088, carefully pushed against the wall: two empty soup bowls, a bitten bread roll, a half-full bottle of water and a glass marked with lipstick. Elena did not stop, but she looked.

'Put out too early,' she said.

'What?'

'Room service. Night service won't collect it for another twenty minutes. The guest didn't want the smell of soup in the cabin.'

'You really are on holiday.'

'I know. It's alarming.'

They took the forward stairwell rather than the lifts. Not because they were avoiding anything, Lukas told himself. Because stairs were quieter. Because former crew understood a ship's vertical structure better through its stairwells. Because lifts forced conversations one did not want.

Deck 8 smelt of carpet, perfume and newly delivered suitcases. Deck 7 smelt of bar, wood polish and a trace of cigar smoke from a lounge whose door closed too slowly. On Deck 6, they heard the final sounds of a rehearsal or technical check from the theatre: a single chord, then a dull knock, then a man's amplified voice saying, 'Check, check, one, two,' although no one sat in the audience.

Deck 5 was still awake.

The boutiques were closed, but their windows remained lit. Watches lay in little islands of light, perfume bottles stood like relics, and a tartan scarf had been arranged to suggest adventure rather than cold. Glasses clinked in a bar

somewhere behind them. Two couples swayed slowly towards the lifts, not drunk enough to be embarrassing, but drunk enough to eat breakfast more slowly the next morning.

There were still guests at Guest Services.

Of course there were.

Elena slowed so conspicuously that Lukas did not need to say anything.

The desk lay in warm light, but the warmth was deceptive. Behind the smiles of the three agents, fatigue sat like a second uniform. On the right, a man in a dressing gown explained that his air conditioning was hostile. On the left, a woman held up her phone and insisted that because her internet package was called 'Premium', it ought to behave in a premium fashion. Between them stood Mr Vogel in his beige windbreaker, his walking stick planted on the floor before him like an exhibit.

'I am telling you for the third time,' he declared, 'that coffee is not a luxury. It is civilisation.'

The young agent behind the desk was not Maren, but her face suggested that she knew Maren and would probably be continuing her story of suffering. 'Mr Vogel, the self-service station on Deck 4 opens at half past five. Before then, we would be happy to arrange coffee through room ser-'

'Room service is not coffee. Room service is a telephone call with a waiting time.'

Elena drew breath.

Lukas placed a hand against her back. 'No.'

'I was only going to-'