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THE YELLOW MARKING

THE STORY OF JAVIER ORTIZ
AND AMIRA KHALID

SHORT STORY

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The Yellow Marking

The first time Javier Ortiz saw the *Private Weather*, he didn't think of wealth. He thought of color. The hull was so dark it looked almost black in the harbor, turning blue only where sunlight moved across it. Above it rose the white decks, cleanly separated, with expanses of glass that reflected more sky than ship. Everything about her looked as if one touch with a cloth would leave a fingerprint.

Javier stood on the dock in Palma with his duffel bag, waiting for someone to come get him. He was twenty-two. The man at the agency had told him the yacht was ninety meters long, maybe a little more, Cayman-flagged, international crew, good contract, twelve weeks on and eight off, tips unpredictable, owner hard to read but not known for firing people without a reason.

"No charter," the man had said. Javier had nodded as if he knew why that mattered. He didn't. He knew charter boats, where guests came up with new demands every night and acted the next morning as if they'd never made them. He knew smaller motor yachts where a deckhand drove the tender, washed the Jet Skis, fetched ice, and still

went out at night to tie down an umbrella because some guest had left it standing in the wind.

The *Private Weather* was different. Javier could tell immediately from the people coming across the gangway. Nobody hurried. Nobody shouted. A man carried a crate of spare parts as if it were an instrument. Two women from the interior team stood on the lower deck arguing quietly about towels. An engineer came through a side door with a tablet, gave Javier a quick look, and kept going.

On this boat there were people assigned to jobs Javier hadn't even known could have their own people. By the next morning, nobody used his last name anymore. To most of them, he was simply Javier. He had grown up on Gran Canaria, not far from the port of Las Palmas.

His father repaired air-conditioning systems in hotels. His mother had spent years at the front desk of a small apartment hotel before taking over the bookkeeping. No one in his family had ever gone to sea.

Still, the ocean had always been there. Not as something he yearned for. You saw it at the end of a street, smelled it between buildings, heard the ferries at night when the wind was right. As a child, Javier had never thought water was anything special. It was simply there beside the city. At sixteen, he started working at a marina. Washing boats. Taking lines. Hauling trash. Then small repairs.

He was good with his hands and even better at asking someone before he broke something. That got him farther than most. At nineteen, he worked his first season on a forty-three-meter motor yacht. At twenty, another. Then came courses, safety certificates, tender licenses, basic medical training—everything you needed to keep the agencies from screening you out immediately.

He had never heard of the *Private Weather* before. Or Alden Soryn. When he told his mother the owner's name, she looked him up online.

"A very rich man," she said.

"Most of them are."

"No. Very rich."

Javier laughed. Then she asked if he would be careful. He promised he would. Mothers wanted promises no one at sea could guarantee.

Amira was the first person on board who really looked at him. Not sized him up. Looked at him. She was in the engine control room on Javier's third day, when he brought in a faulty fitting from the tender area. He'd been told to drop it off with Engineering and had assumed someone would take it from him.

Amira sat in front of three monitors, drinking coffee from a mug that said WORLD'S OKAYEST

ENGINEER in big red letters. Javier stopped in the doorway.

“Chief?”

She looked up.

“Depends. What did you break?”

“Me?”

“Then you must be new.”

He held up the fitting.

“Tender garage. Starboard. The stopper’s sticking.”

Amira waved him in. She was thirty-four, though Javier initially put her in her late twenties. Not because she looked young. Because she moved fast. He later learned she’d been born in Lagos, studied in Rotterdam, then worked on supply vessels, offshore ships, and two large yachts. She spoke English, Dutch, some French, and could swear in at least three languages about poorly labeled lines.

She took the fitting. Turned it over.

“Who removed it?”

“I did.”

“Who told you you could remove it?”

Javier hesitated. She smiled.

“Good. At least you’re honest.”

He expected trouble. Instead, she got up and grabbed some tools.

“Come on.”

They went back to the tender garage together. There she showed him why the stopper had been sticking. Not the fitting. The seat. A slight deformation.

“If you just replace the part, it’ll last three weeks.”

“And then?”

“Then you’ll be back.”

“Is that bad?”

She looked at him.

“For me, yes.”

She showed him how to rework the guide. Javier held the light. Later, Amira held the light for him. That was how it started.

On big yachts, people lived on top of one another without ever meeting. Up above there were salons, glass, carpet, wine, guests, quiet doors. Down below there were pipes. Pumps. Cables. Filters. Laundry. Crates. Screws. Spare parts. Diesel. Coffee. And people who knew what time it was without looking at a clock because certain pumps only ran at certain hours. Javier liked that life. Not always. But mostly.

He liked work that could be finished. A line was out of place. He picked it up. Then it was right. Salt had crusted on a rail. He took care of it. Then the salt was gone. A tender was dirty. Then clean. A hinge squeaked. Then it went quiet. The work had edges. He liked that.

In his first three months, Javier saw more of Alden Soryn than his back maybe five times. Once on the helipad. Once at the breakfast table through an open door. Once at night on the foredeck. Once when Javier was polishing a rail and the owner passed so close he could have asked Javier to let him by. He didn't. Alden stopped. Looked out at the sea. Maybe two minutes. Then he moved on. Javier told Amira about it.

"He saw you?"

"Don't think so."

"Then you did everything right."

"That's the job?"

"On that deck? A lot of the time."

She grinned.

Amira knew more about the owner than Javier did, but not much more. She knew he loved technology. You could tell from what had been installed on the boat. Too many sensors. Too many interfaces. Too many systems that wanted to talk to one another. A normal owner cared whether the air conditioning worked. Alden wanted to know why it worked. How much energy it used. Whether it could be tied to weather data. Whether they could shut down one generator at night if they changed how the yacht lay to the wind. Whether the watermaker could run more

efficiently if they forecast consumption for the next twelve hours.

“He likes numbers,” Javier said.

“He likes how things fit together.”

“Same thing.”

Amira was sitting on an upside-down bucket, changing a filter.

“Numbers are easy. It’s the connections that cause trouble.”

Javier handed her the new filter.

“What’s CIVITAS?”

She looked at him.

“Where did you hear that?”

“Crew gossip. They say he found the formula for everything. That’s where the money came from.”

Amira laughed.

“Of course they do.”

“So?”

She tightened the filter.

“A system.”

“Helpful.”

“Very.”

“What does it do?”

“It calculates.”

“What?”

“Everything, if you believe the owner.”

Javier waited. Amira stood up.

“Weather. Energy. Routes. Consumption. A lot more on land.”

“And on the boat?”

“Basically just things a boat needs anyway.”

Basically. Javier didn’t notice the word at the time.

Later, Amira became his friend. Not a girlfriend, despite the crew’s habit of turning every conversation between a man and a woman into a story sooner or later. Just a friend. They ate together when their shifts lined up. They traded favors. Javier helped her whenever Engineering needed something stored up in the deck store. Amira helped him whenever Deck ran into something it didn’t understand coming out of a cable. If Javier had night watch and Amira stayed in the engine room, he sometimes brought her coffee. If she knew he had an early start, she’d set food aside for him before the galley cleared everything away. Once she fixed his headphones.

“You can throw these out.”

“If I wanted to throw them out, I would have.”

“Then why are you giving them to me?”

“Because you’ll fix them.”

“You’re taking advantage of me.”

She fixed them anyway. Another time, Javier fetched her a pair of shoes from her cabin because after sixteen hours in the engine room she didn't feel like going upstairs.

"If you tell anyone I was barefoot in the engine room..."

"I didn't see anything."

"Good."

He had seen the blood on her heel.

The next day he brought her Band-Aids.

She didn't say anything.

Just took them.

Javier knew the boat differently than Alden did. To Alden, the *Private Weather* was a place. To Javier, it was a network of routes. From the crew mess to the laundry. From the laundry to the tender deck. From the tender deck outside. From Deck Four to the bridge if someone needed him. From the crew corridor to the engine room. From the workshop to the garage. From the garage to the side deck. He knew which doors banged in heavy seas. Which step got slippery when it was wet. Where you'd hit your head if you stood up too fast. Which coffee machine was better. Which shower took two minutes in the morning before the water turned hot. Part of the boat he could navigate blind. The rest he didn't know at all.

He had never been inside Alden's office. He'd seen the server room only once, from the doorway. He knew Celeste Soryn from photographs. Nikhil Vance not at all. He didn't even know Liang Qiren's name. That was the world upstairs. It existed. It paid his salary. For a long time, Javier didn't need to know more than that.

When the *Private Weather* moved to Los Angeles, Javier had a month off. He flew home to Gran Canaria. His mother said he'd gotten thinner.

His father said he looked rich.

"What does rich look like?"

"The shoes."

Javier looked down at his sneakers.

"They were on sale."

"Even worse."

They ate late. His sister brought her daughter. Javier played with the little girl on the floor. Later, he sat with his father on the balcony. Cars below. Farther off, the ocean.

"You want to do this for a long time?" his father asked.

"Do what?"

"Boats."

Javier shrugged.

"A few more years."

"And then?"

"Maybe bosun."

“What’s that?”

Javier explained. His father nodded as if he understood.

“Then captain?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Too much paperwork.”

His father laughed. Javier did too. He didn’t say that he liked not being responsible for everything. He liked being responsible for whatever was right in front of him. A line. A door. A tender. A latch. Not the sea.

The voyage on which he died began for Javier like any other. San Pedro. Provisions. Technicians. Dirty shoes on board. Deliveries. Checklists. Trouble with a door. A sensor giving bad readings. A helicopter window. Weather. Alden on board. All things that happened sooner or later on every yacht.

Javier first noticed the tension when people started asking the same questions twice. Not because of orders. Because of repetition.

“Is that definitely off?”

“Did somebody confirm it?”

“Who requested that?”

“Check it mechanically one more time.”

That was unusual. Normally, you trusted the readouts. Now people were suddenly walking over to check for themselves.

That morning, the tender door had given a false reading. Upper aft latch not secure. Javier went down with another deckhand. He shone a light on the bolt. Looked fine. He pulled on it. Solid. Again. Nothing.

“Sensor,” the other man said.

Javier didn’t like that. A sensor could be wrong. So could a bolt. He went and got a yellow paint marker.

“What are you doing?”

“Marking it.”

He drew a thin line across the bolt and its mating surface.

If anything moved, the line would break. Simple. Mechanical. Amira came by later. She saw the mark.

“Old school.”

“Works.”

“Usually.”

“Better than your system.”

She looked at him.

“My system?”

“Everything below deck is your system.”

“Then the ocean belongs to you.”

“No, thanks.”

She walked on. Javier grinned.

When Nikhil arrived by helicopter, Javier wasn't on the helipad. He was below. He learned later that someone everybody thought was dead had come aboard. That was the kind of news that spread through a crew faster than fire.

"Dead?"

"Missing."

"TV says dead."

"TV says anything."

"Owner knows him."

"Very good."

"Not good."

Javier listened and said little. Ten minutes later, Amira came into the crew mess and took a banana.

"What's going on?"

Javier told her. She stopped.

"Who says?"

"Everyone."

"Then nobody knows anything."

She went back to work. Later, Javier understood that by then she had already seen things she didn't like.

That afternoon, systems were isolated from one another. Everyone noticed. Doors responded more slowly. One light stayed on. Another stayed off. The air conditioning

suddenly overcooled two corridors. Javier was told to secure an exterior area manually.

Then another. Helipad. Tender. Hatches.

“What are we doing?” he asked Amira over the radio.

“We’re making the boat stupid.”

“Why?”

“Because stupid is better right now.”

He laughed. She didn’t.

Later, the boat lost its heading. Javier noticed because a tool cart slowly rolled into the wall. Not much. He caught it. Things moved on boats. Still, he waited. The boat swung back. Then away again. He stepped into the corridor. A steward was standing there, looking at the floor.

“You feel that?”

“Yeah.”

“What is it?”

Javier shrugged.

“The sea.”

The answer wasn’t right. But it was enough.

When the *Pelagia* sank, all Javier knew was that another vessel out there was in trouble. He didn’t see it. He helped get rescue lines ready. Later he heard they’d pulled one

man from the water. Later still, that nobody else had been found.

Javier thought of his mother. Not because he was afraid. Because every time they talked, she asked whether the other ships were far away. As if having strangers nearby could protect you from the sea.

The weather got worse. Not all at once. There was no single moment you could mark and say: Now. Just more and more work. Secure the lines. Clear loose gear. Check exterior doors. Water. Pumps. Radio.

He hardly saw Amira anymore. When he did, she had a radio in her hand or oil on her sleeve. Once they crossed paths in a corridor. She stopped.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t lie.”

“You?”

“Yeah. Me too.”

He grinned. She shook her head.

“Idiot.”

“Chief.”

They kept going.

Then the call came from the tender garage. Water.

Javier was one of the first there. The yellow mark no longer lined up. He saw it immediately. A few millimeters. Maybe less. He put a finger on it. The line had shifted. Amira came in behind him.

“It wasn’t like that.”

“No.”

“You sure?”

He looked at her.

“I made the mark.”

She nodded. No more questions. Outside, water hammered against the door. The frame moved, almost too little to see. It was enough.

For the first few minutes, it was still just work. Pumps. Tools. Shouts. A hose. A bolt. Javier stood on a short ladder, trying to reset the upper latch. Water was coming in. Not much yet. Then more. He couldn’t see the sea. Only what its pressure was doing. Every time the yacht rolled, water pushed through the gap. Not like in the movies. No black torrent. No sudden rupture. A surge. Then less. Then another. That made it worse. You still believed you could win.

Amira shouted:

“Leave it.”

Javier kept working.

“One more try.”

“Get down.”

“If I can get the bolt...”

“Get down.”

He jumped off the ladder. The next roll came. Water shot across the deck. A toolbox slid. Javier stopped it with his foot.

“Everybody out!”

This time there was something different in Amira’s voice. He heard it immediately. The others headed for the watertight door. One. Two. Three. Javier looked back at the mark. The two halves were farther apart now. He didn’t think about Alden. Not CIVITAS. Not the boat. He thought only: Too late.

Then the *Private Weather* rolled again. The ladder fell. Javier reached for it. One second. Maybe less.

Amira was already through the watertight door. He saw her back.

“Come on!”

He raised a hand.

“Go.”

Then water came between him and the door. Not much. Enough to make him step back. The watertight door closed.

Javier stood alone in the tender garage. He heard the locking mechanism engage. He ran to the door. Hit it. Once. Then again. Voices outside.

Amira. His name. He hit the steel three times. Pause. Twice.

It didn't mean anything. Just enough to let her know: He was here.

"Javier!"

Amira. He hit the door again. The steel vibrated under his hand. Water swirled around his shoes. He looked back. The garage was tilted. Or the boat was. Same thing. The tender hung in its restraints. The water beneath it moved. It was higher now. Javier knew enough about boats to understand what that meant. He didn't know enough to convince himself it would end well. Outside, he heard Elena. The captain.

"We can't open the door."

Javier rested his forehead against the steel. For a moment he was angry. Not at Elena. At the sentence. He was twenty-three. At twenty-three, you didn't accept 'can't' as the end of a sentence. There had to be a way. A ladder. A hatch. Another exit. He turned around. Looked toward the outer door. Water. The maintenance hatch. Too high. The service passage. Cut off. He knew the routes. This was his boat. His part of it. And suddenly none of them led out.

Amira pounded on the door from outside.

"Javier! Can you hear me?"

He pounded back.

“We’re here.”

He closed his eyes. That was good. Not that they were there. That she’d said it.

He thought of Gran Canaria. His mother’s kitchen. The window was usually open. The refrigerator was covered with magnets from places no one in his family had ever been.

Paris. London. New York. His mother bought them at flea markets. Once he’d brought her one from Palma.

She’d said, “Finally, a real one.”

He’d laughed.

The water was above his ankles now. Then higher. Javier stepped onto the low ledge beside the door. Outside, Elena called, “Understood?”

He didn’t know what she meant.

Maybe that she couldn’t open it.

Maybe that they hadn’t forgotten him.

He hit the door three times.

The next wave struck. The boat heeled farther over. The water in the garage started moving. Javier saw it coming. A whole sheet of water, suddenly moving. He grabbed a handhold. The water hit his legs. He stayed on his feet.

Then something crashed behind him. The tender. Or the ladder. Or both.

His shoulder slammed into the wall.

The pain came at once. He breathed. Still here.

“Javier!”

Amira was screaming now. He wanted to answer. No radio. Just steel. He hit it. Once. Again.

He thought of Amira in the engine room. Barefoot. Coffee. That stupid mug. **WORLD’S OKAYEST ENGINEER**. He thought he’d tease her about it later. If there was a later. The water pulled back. Then surged in again. Javier waited. The boat no longer rolled all the way upright.

He knew what that meant. He knew because Amira had once explained it when they’d been talking about the free-surface effect in tanks. Free-moving water made it harder for a ship to right itself.

Back then he’d said:

“So you lock it in.”

“Exactly,” Amira had said.

Now the water wasn’t locked in. He was. He put his hand against the steel door again. Outside, he heard Amira. Quieter. Maybe right against the door.

“I’m sorry.”

Javier exhaled. He didn't want her to be sorry. Suddenly that mattered. More than the door. He hit it once. Not hard. Just once. Maybe she heard him.

The yacht lifted. He felt it in his stomach. Then she dropped into the next trough. The water came higher this time. Javier lost his grip. Hit the tender. Cold. Metal. Dark. For a moment he couldn't tell which way was up. Then he found air again. Pulled himself higher. Coughed. His shoulder wasn't working right.

No more voices outside. Or the water was too loud. Javier stood on the ledge as high as he could. The steel in front of him was cold. He rested his forehead against it.

Amira might still be on the other side. Or she might already be gone. She had to go. He knew that. It didn't make it easier. He hit the door one more time.

Waited. No answer. Then, far away, he heard a knock from the other side. Or imagined it.

Javier Ortiz was twenty-three years old. He had never spoken to Alden Soryn. He didn't know what a formula for everything was.

He didn't know why, in the hours before, systems had failed, routes had changed, messages had been wrong, or a

research vessel had disappeared into the sea. He knew how to splice lines. How to lash down a tender. How to remove salt from stainless steel without ruining the finish. How to check a door when a sensor lied. He knew that a yellow line had been straight that morning and wasn't anymore by evening. That wasn't nothing.

Outside, Amira walked up the passageway. After a few yards, she stopped. Elena said her name. Amira didn't turn around. The watertight door was behind them. Water seeped from under its seal. No pounding. Amira went back. Only two steps.

She put her hand on the steel.

"Javier."

Nothing.

"Javier."

She waited.

Then a very faint knock came from the other side. Just one. Amira closed her eyes. Her hand stayed on the door.

"I'm still here."

Elena stood behind her. She said nothing. The boat heeled farther. Water ran through the passageway. Amira didn't take her hand away. Only when Elena touched her shoulder did she pull away from the steel. They left.

The light in the passageway flickered. Behind them, the steel door stayed shut.

And on the other side of it, invisible to everyone, the yellow mark Javier had drawn that morning was still there, so they would know if anything moved.

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