

## 5 The Captain At The Window

The lakes never forgive, but they do remember.

That was the first thing Captain Elias Harker learned, long before the braces, long before the house, long before the solitude hardened into something permanent. The Great Lakes carry memory the way wood carries grain, subtly, invisibly, until pressure reveals the lines already there.

He had spent most of his life moving across them. As a strong young deckhand working the rigging and cargo with tough weathered hands. Then as a mate, learning how the motion of

the waves and movement of the Sun and stars played upon the ship beneath him. Eventually rising to the command of a two-masted schooner that hauled timber, grain, coal, iron, anything that would float and pay. His world smelled of wet canvas, tar, rusted iron, and cold water trapped in seams. He knew how to read wind from the texture of waves, how to judge distance by sound alone when fog erased the horizon. He trusted the lakes more than he trusted people. The lakes, at least, behaved honestly. They did not pretend to care.

Men disappeared out there. Ships vanished. Entire crews were taken without spectacle or witnesses. The lakes swallowed them and gave little or nothing back, sometimes not even proof. Elias accepted this. It felt orderly. Fair, in its own way.

What he had not accepted was surviving.

The accident came late in the season, when ice formed thin and treacherous along the shoreline, sharp as broken glass. They were unloading timber in failing light, the deck slick with meltwater. Winter pressed close, impatient. Cables snapped, no one ever agreed which one had given way first, and the load shifted just enough to unbalance the deck. Elias remembered the sound more than the pain: a deep, wet crack, like a mast giving way under too much sail. He remembered looking down and not understanding what he was seeing. He remembered the lake very close, black and waiting, its surface unbroken.

They hauled him back aboard. Someone tied off the bleeding with rigging rope. Another kept talking to him in an attempt to draw his attention away from grievous wounds. Elias listened distantly, watching the sky, thinking with detached clarity that it looked exactly as it always had. Then he drifted away.

He awoke on land. He awoke lighter. Below the knees, there was nothing. The doctors spoke carefully, explaining what had

been done and why. Legs crushed beyond saving. Infection inevitable. Survival uncertain. Elias nodded through it all. The lakes had taken what they wanted. That was their right.

What unsettled him most was how the loss of his legs brought a sudden, unbearable presence of the ground and his lack of connection to it.

He went ashore... home, to recover.

Rebecca nursed him through it. She learned how to lift him without hurting either of them. Learned how to clean wounds without flinching. Learned how to speak to him when he stared too long at nothing. She brought meals he barely touched, read aloud when silence grew too heavy, sat beside him at night when pain came in waves sharp enough to steal his breath. The house changed during that time. Furniture was moved, then moved again. Rugs folded back. Paths cleared. Everything narrowed, adapted to a man who could no longer afford misjudgment.

When the braces arrived, Rebecca cried. Elias did not. They were solid uprights rising from just below the knees where shins should have been, heavy boots fixed at the bottom, leather straps meant to distribute weight and deny absence. They were not prosthetics in the way imagined. They did not replace. They corrected. They forced the body into obedience.

Standing became an act of negotiation.

Rebecca stood close as he learned. Her hands hovered near his shoulders, his back, never quite touching unless he wavered. His own hands gripped furniture, doorframes, her forearms, anything to steady himself. He learned the precise angle needed to rise without pitching forward. Learned how long he could remain upright before the pressure behind his knees, phantom

and real, became unbearable. Walking was possible, but only in short, deliberate movements. Each step had to be planned. Each surface assessed. The house taught him his limits.

Six-Months passed before he returned mid-season to the lakes, still a captain, still trusted. But something fundamental had changed. Though the deck moved beneath him, the movement no longer felt natural and with no firm connection, his balance was difficult to maintain. Elias felt smaller now, measured, as the lakes remained vast and indifferent.

Rebecca died while he was away. Illness, slow and unremarkable in its cruelty. She had kept the burden hidden during her husband's recovery, wanting to fulfill his longing to return to the lakes.

He arrived to a house already quieted by the silence of emptiness.

There was a son, only one. James.

A boy raised between departures and returns, between promises made and postponed. A boy who had grown into a man tired of docks and waiting. James had been away at school the previous two years and stayed only briefly after the funeral. Conciliatory words were exchanged between father and son, but they did not mend anything.

Letters followed for a time, then stopped. Elias did not ask why. He had captained enough to know when a course could no longer be corrected and had to be stayed.

He retired not long after.

The bedroom became his world. He arranged it the way he had once arranged a cabin; everything within reach, everything

purposeful. The bed placed so he could lower himself straight back without twisting. The chair positioned where he could brace himself properly before standing. The floor bore faint scars of repetition: metal scraping wood in the same arc, day after day. The braces stood at the foot of the bed.

At first, he removed them only at night. Unbuckling the straps carefully, loosening them in the same order every time. The braces were awkward and heavy when empty. He set them down upright, adjusting until they balanced without support.

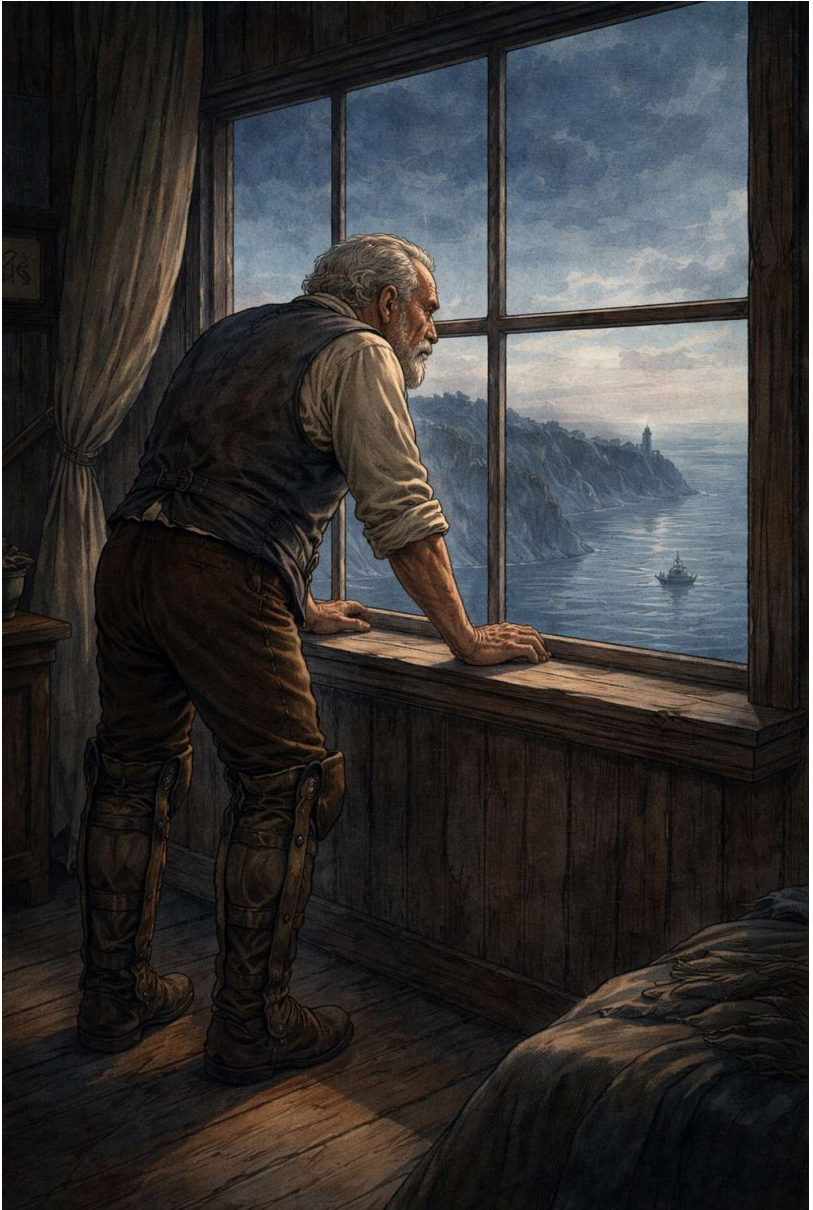
The house not having been cleaned properly since Rebecca's death collected dust quickly. It settled into the leather seams and dulled the metal. Elias noticed this with mild curiosity.

Sleep was difficult. When he lay down, the room felt wrong. It lacked the comfort and familiarity of his cramped cabin afloat, the ceiling too tall, the walls too straight. He dreamed of the lakes, the endless, flat water stretching outward in all directions. In the dreams, he stood upright on firm sea-faring legs. He began sleeping in shorter intervals. Standing felt safer.

At the window, he could steady himself. His hands rested heavily on the sill, fingers curled white with pressure. He needed the support. Without it, balance became uncertain, treacherous. Beyond the glass the great lake spread out below him, vast and gray. He would stand there for hours, locked into place, watching its surface change with light and weather, its nearness offering no comfort at all. Neighbors noticed. They saw him at the window at all hours, unmoving. Some waved, he never waved back. They said his shadow looked wrong, too tall, too narrow, stretched beyond his frame.

Inside, mirrors unsettled him. Not because of his missing legs, but because his reflection seemed delayed, as if it took time to

decide whether to show his former or current self. He removed them one by one, leaving pale outlines on stained walls.



Years passed. Though his upper body thinned his hands remained strong, veined. The braces too remained reliable, until the night they were no longer needed.

The reaper did not announce its presence. There was no storm, no wind worth noting. The house held its breath the way it always did, tight and familiar. Elias unbuckled the straps by habit, fingers moving without thought, left, right, then the lower buckles, leather sighing softly as tension released. He intended to sit. There was no defiance in the act, no testing. Just the ordinary, careful motion of a man who had learned to survive by anticipating collapse. As he shifted his weight forward, something failed to happen. The expected pull, the sharp, insistent absence behind the knees did not come. Instead, there was resistance. A strange, vaguely familiar buoyant steadiness as if the air itself had thickened around his lower body. He froze. Slowly, very slowly, he looked down. Where the braces should have ended, where the emptiness had lived for decades, there was form. Not flesh, at least not fully. His legs were there in outline only; pale, translucent shapes, like moonlight caught in fog. They did not touch the floor so much as remember it. He could see the boards through them, warped and scared. But the unmistakable shape of calves, ankles and feet placed squarely where the boots had always stood. They were his legs. Not as they had been before the accident, but as they had existed in memory, unmarked by age, unburdened by weight.

In that moment Elias was unaware of breath, heartbeat, or any labors of earthly existence. He did not reach for the chair. He felt no pain, no pressure, no imbalance. The phantom limbs carried him effortlessly, bearing a lifetime of tension without reservation or complaint.

For the first time since the laces had taken his legs he stood without correction. Panoramas of unbidden images surrounded him: Rebecca's hands steadying his shoulders during those first

terrible months at home. James as a boy, on the dock squinting into the sun, waiting for a ship that always arrived too late. The sound of water against a hull at night, measured, endless, forgiving nothing.

The room felt distant, as though it was receding into a fogbank within his mind. The braces stood empty at the foot of the bed, straps hanging loose, dust thick upon them. They looked smaller to him now. Crude and temporary. Elias took a step. There was no sound. Another step. Still no sound. He moved away from the bed, away from the chair, away from the walls that had held him captive for so long. He moved smoothly through the window and past the sill he no longer needed to grip. The distorted glass offered no resistance. The room did not react, the light did not change. It was as it is and will always be.

When the house was opened years later, there was no sign of struggle, no remains, no evidence of departure. Only the braces, left where they had always been. The bed bore the faint impression of a man who had risen without sitting back down.

Having no desire for inheritance, the house was again closed, sealed to its fate, whatever that may be, and James never returned.

The expansive lake below the bluff had remained calm. Low mist obscured the shoreline making it unreadable. She had waited patiently to claim the long overdue balance, now paid in full.

Like her sisters, she is unwilling to give anything back.

They rarely do.