

THE LAST RAIN MAKER



ZACK
RILEY

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Dad used to tell me about the rain. What it was like to watch the clouds bleed water and how the lifeblood of the land used to fall from the skies above. Now water is something reserved for the rich, and the tools to create the rain are lost or damaged beyond repair. That's what makes the *Rome* special; this ship has both, water, and although it's non-functional, a Rain Maker.

Nights like this I love. It's nearing dawn, and for a brief moment I can almost see the former ocean, now the Pacific Desert. I place my rifle down against one of the bulkheads and lean on the railing. With my eyes closed I can feel the pre-dawn wind through my hair and across my face. I imagine all that water stretching across the horizon. *Is this what it was like out at sea?* I used to do this with Dad; how I miss him. I would stay up and keep him company on these long morning watches. It's hard to believe it's been seven years since he passed.

First light, and long shadows have formed across the deck of the *Rome*. The silhouettes of the ship's four cranes sit in the morning darkness, shrouded by the sand dunes in the morning light. I can almost hear Dad's voice as I look over the bridge wing to the forecastle and the large obscure forward mast. "*You see that, Kayla, that's the Rain Maker.*"

"Can you make it work, Dad?" A tear rolls over my cheek. I can feel it cut through the dust on my face and sigh. *Great, now Zoey is going to ask questions,* I tell myself as I attempt to wipe the evidence of my grief from my face. I look at the small trace of mud on my hand, created from my tears. *At least I get to shower today,* I tell myself. A luxury

of living on the *Rome*... it's a wonder how they even found water below the surface here.

I pick up my rifle and look over the oil well, the reason we're still able to live onboard, and wonder how it works, as both oil and the salty ground water are pumped into the ship. Nothing looks out of the ordinary, so I turn and walk back into the bridge. My eyes scan over the old controls, the wheel, the throttles, the alarms panel, and next to the helm, the breakers for the Rain Maker. How many times I've wanted to throw the breaker and see what would happen.

I step forwards and brush the dust from the panel, and the thought goes through my head of what would happen. Dad said a rumbling and a huge yellow fog would spew from the machine. Clouds would form; then there would be lightning as the sky would darken. The first few drops of rain would fall, followed by a torrential downpour.

I place my hand against the breaker, wanting to throw the switch.

"Nothing will happen, you know that right?"

I freeze and drop my hand from the console, turning to find Rex standing against the bulkhead. I don't know how I didn't hear him coming up the ladder to the bridge.

"Yeah, it's been isolated since before I was born."

Rex nods and walks towards me holding his hand out. I hand him my rifle and wonder why he is up on the bridge so early. "Your watch doesn't start for another forty minutes. Couldn't you sleep?"

Rex shrugs his shoulders and walks over to the barometer. "You could say that." He taps the glass and scratches his chin.

"What is it?"

"There's a dust storm coming. You're on duty this week for the storm shutters, right?"

"Yeah?"

"Go, I'll take the watch early so you can close them, then get your head down. It's going to be a rough afternoon," he says, then walks onto the bridge wing.

I take no time climbing down the ladder bays to the main deck and untie the tethers that hold the large steel doors locked. I don't have long until the sun rises and the deck heats up. One by one I close the storm shutters. The last thing we want is for sand to fill one of the intakes and kill the engines. Who knows if we could get them started again.

It's been almost thirty minutes, and finally I've made it to the last of the shutters, adjacent the forward mast on the forecastle. I never really noticed it before but there's an extra control box underneath the platform. Curiosity gets the better of me, and knowing nobody can see me, not even Rex, I open it to find an isolation lever; however, it's still set to on.

If anything on the ship is broken, normally it's turned off and labelled 'do not operate.' This has me puzzled, and I know it's not supposed to be left like this. I pull the lever to the off position, then close the panel and turn to face the first rays of sunlight as they kiss the desert. It's beautiful, the deepest orange meets the sand and filters through to an intense blue of the morning sky.

I make my way back towards the *Rome*'s super structure, and look up, watching Rex enjoying his morning brew before the heat of the day becomes too much to bear. Tying the doors closed I start the climb up the ladder bays back to my cabin. It's still early and I only pass Ash on his way to the hydroponics in one of the cargo holds. He seems grumpy and doesn't say much, but that's normal for this hour as most of the seventy-eight crew are still sleeping.

I ease my cabin door open, doing my best not to wake Zoey. She stirs and rolls over in her bunk as I take my towel and toiletries, and remove my clothes. I've been dying for this shower for days now, but am thankful I still can shower, since most settlements struggle for a drop of water. I wrap the towel around my body and walk down the passage to the ablutions.

I push the door open to find Stirling trying to make Elisabeth laugh as she brushes her teeth. It's not working, so he focuses his attention on me. "Morning, Kayla, eventful night?"

"Yeah, I saw a S T four R." I reply as I close the stall door and dust myself down. A small cloud of dust fills the stall and I am thankful I chose to do this here, and not in the cabin.

"S T four R, what's that?" Stirling asks.

I ignore him as I place a bucket at my feet and stand under the showerhead, pressing the button adjacent the tap. Fifteen seconds of bliss lands on my face, and body. The water runs over me and pools in the bucket at my feet. Almost as soon as the stream

starts it stops. I reach down into the bucket and grab a soapy sponge, using what little water there is to scrub myself clean.

“A star you idiot,” Elisabeth laughs as I hear her leaving and the door close. I can hear the buzz from Stirling’s clippers as he trims his beard. He doesn’t seem too interested in talking.

I finish soaping myself up, and empty the water from the bucket. I close my eyes and press the button once more for my last fifteen seconds of rationed water.

“What the hell?” Stirling calls out. “Kayla?”

“Yeah, what?” I reply, as a copper taste brushes over my tongue.

“Is there something wrong with your water?”

I open my eyes as the water stops, and look down seeing the rusty liquid at my feet. I step from the bucket and grab my towel. “Yeah, it’s red.” *So much for being clean*, I tell myself. I feel dirtier now than before. I step from the stall as Stirling stares blankly at the sink. “It looks like the desert got inside.”

He nods. “I’ll call the control room and find out what’s happening.”

I walk back down the hallway to my cabin. It’s still quiet, probably twenty minutes until everyone wakes. I ease the door open and eye Zoey, hard against the bulkhead, still sleeping. I don’t mind; it gives me a moment to use the little water in the wash basin to rinse my skin. I cup both my hands into the basin and splash the water over my face, then look up out the window.

The winds are starting to pick up and sand is building on the window sill.

“Save some water, Kay,” Zoey says with a yawn. “We can get some suds and clean the windows later,” she jokes.

“Rex would have a fit,” I tell her as I turn and try not to drop my towel.

“He would have a fit with you washing your face here instead of the showers.”

I open my locker and sort through for a clean set of clothes to sleep in. “There’s something wrong with the water. It’s red.” I pull a shirt and a pair of underwear on then hang my towel up. “Hopefully they can fix it soon.”

Zoey climbs out of her bed, then shrugs. “I’ll let you know,” she says, then exits the cabin, probably going to use the toilet. I hear what sounds like uncooked rice dropping into a plastic bowl as grains of sand begin to fly against the window with the increased wind. I try not to let it bother me as I climb up into my bunk.

We’ve had big storms before, so it’s not like this will be much different. After all, this ship was built to withstand storms at sea; now it’s beached in the desert. A little sand and wind won’t hurt it. I close my eyes and pull my blanket over my body. I know Zoey will be back any moment, and I hope I can be asleep by then.

The room creaks and I feel my ears pop as gusts of wind thump against the ship. It’s amazing how quickly the weather can turn, given that only an hour ago it was dead still. It’s not my problem, so I attempt to drift off to sleep.

I wake to the dull echo of the ship’s P.A. system in the passageways. I sit up and look at the clock atop my locker – nine thirty-three. I place my head in my hands, contemplating

if I should try to sleep some more or get up. I want to lay back down, but even if I did, the sound of the wind against the window is becoming too distracting.

I slide from the bunk and reach for my overalls, then my boots. Stepping outside the cabin, I find the hallway still empty, which is odd with seventy-eight crew on the *Rome*. Normally there are at least one or two people doing something. I try not to let it bother me. It's a while until lunch, and I curse the fact that I have skipped breakfast. I walk to the basin and splash a handful of water on my face, just enough to wipe my eyes, before I look out the window.

Small flurries of sand are being blown about on the *Rome's* deck between the gusts. *Rex wasn't joking*, I tell myself as I catch the beginnings of something big on the horizon. I'm curious. I've been through many storms, but normally they hit at night, never have I seen one approaching during the day before.

I can feel the grin on my face as I climb the ladders towards the bridge but still find it odd that I haven't seen anybody. *They must be all making preparations for the storm*, I tell myself.

Rex seems surprised to see me as I walk through the door onto the bridge. He turns away from me and looks out the windows. "It's a big one."

I walk up next to him and look out over the desert. My jaw drops at what is coming. From left to right, is a wall of red, a cloud unlike anything I have seen before in my life. It's angry and rolling back upon itself, shadowed by the dark grey clouds atop it. Lightning weaves in and out of the rolling wall of dust, creating the most beautiful yet terrifying sight.

“That’s incredible,” I tell Rex.

“Yeah, it’s the biggest dust storm I’ve ever seen.”

“Should we be worried?” I ask as the wind around the ship subsides. It appears dead still outside now, and Rex walks towards the door to the bridge wing. He throws the large handle to the side and opens the door. I follow him out onto the deck and am immediately caught off guard by the sudden drop in temperature. “What’s happening?” I ask.

Rex looks at me like I’m an idiot. “You can’t put two and two together?” He points at the approaching storm. “Calm before the storm. We have about five minutes until this thing hits.”

“What’s going to happen?” I ask, still mesmerised by the rolling wall of dust.

“A storm like this? Day will turn to night, the darkest of nights. You won’t be able to see more than an arm’s length in front of you. You will feel like you are being suffocated and the wind will pick up the sand and blow it against your skin and eat away at whatever is exposed.” He turns and walks back into the bridge and over to the exterior lighting breakers.

I follow and close the doors, my focus still fixed on the rolling wall before us. “Can you turn those on?” Rex asks, gesturing to the breakers near me, as he starts throwing switches. One by one, the deck lights illuminate, blanketing the front of the ship in an almost blinding light. “Just in case anyone is still out there,” he says as he returns to the front windows to watch the approaching storm.

I look over the board and notice I have thrown the breaker to the Rain Maker. I scramble to the window, but don't see anything from the machine.

"What's up, Kayla?" Rex asks, noticing my erratic movements.

"I threw the breakers to the Rain Maker."

Rex shrugs. "It's isolated and hasn't worked since before you were a kid anyway."

I'm a little disappointed nothing has happened, but I didn't expect any less. A part of me wanted to see what Dad had described, but I knew it would be too good to be true.

My ears pop again as the wind returns. The base of the storm is now visible, with a deep black void beneath it. The first of the clouds roll over us, and all I can do is look up at the wall of sand. Moments pass and just as Rex said, day turns to night. I watch on as at first the deck lights illuminate the ship. Sand blows across the deck like how I imagined waves on the ocean. Little by little the ship vanishes into the storm until all I can make out is the glow from the deck lights.

"That's it," Rex says as he pulls a book from his pocket and sits down in one of the chairs. "No bandits are going to try to get onboard now."

I feel my stomach rumble and know there isn't much left to see up on the bridge that I already haven't seen. I exit the bridge, leaving Rex to his novel and make my way to the galley.

The wind sounds haunting as it echoes through the corridors, as if a door or window has been left open. I enter the café and take an apple from the fruit bowl. Things are starting to bother me now, as the only person I have seen since I woke up is Rex. The lights

flicker; I know this isn't good, and I start to second guess if I closed all the storm shutters.

Elisabeth walks into the café and throws herself on one of the benches in frustration.

"It's really bad, Kay," she says.

I swallow the food in my mouth and look at her. "What's up? What's happening?"

"Didn't you hear the P.A.? We have huge problems with water."

Problems? I ponder, knowing the issue with the ship's water started before I went to bed. "What do you mean? Is there a problem with the drinking water still?"

"Drinking water, cooling, hydroponics – nothing is working. This storm is making things really difficult, and if we don't sort it out soon, they will have to shut down the engines and we will go black."

A chill ran up my spine. "Where is everyone?"

"The control room or hydroponics. They are trying to find the issue. Stirling thinks it's electrical. I overheard him talking to Ash, and if the ship goes black, the heaters in the oil tanks will fail, and we will not be able to refine the fuel from the oil wells. No oil, no fuel, no water. The *Rome* will be dead."

Elisabeth stands up, then walks over to the sink and fills a glass with water. Its contents are the colour of the storm, red and dirty. Elisabeth moans in frustration and empties it into the sink.

I need to see if there is anything I can do to help. I get up off the chair and toss my apple core into the compost. Another draft blows through the ship and sends a chill up my spine.

I climb down the ladder bay to the control room, but Stirling finds me on the stairs.

“Hydroponics. That’s where we’re needed,” he states.

I turn and walk with him as he pushes through bulkhead door after bulkhead door.

“All the power to the pumps is gone. We can’t find the source of the issue.”

“Have you checked all the breakers?”

He nods. “Yeah, everything is on.” He opens the door into the aft cargo hold, the hydroponics compartment, and I follow him inside. I have always loved coming in here. Gardens tower high, and powerful flood lights illuminate the room. The air is humid, and it’s always amazed me that someone got all this to work. It’s how we can live on the *Rome*.

Stirling hands me a torch and points along the bulkhead. “Follow these cables; if you find a break let me know.” I take the torch from him and do as he asks, but after tracing the entire length of the cables I find nothing. It’s very quiet in here and apart from the dull echo from the odd voice from another member of the *Rome*’s crew, I have forgotten about the raging storm outside.

I push forward into the next hold. Normally nobody uses the forward holds, as the hatches don’t seal properly. Sand blows in through holes in the hatches, not a lot but enough to be a nuisance. I find another cable run and follow it, finding it leads up

through the deck head to the forecastle. I know the pumps and hoses are primarily located up there, and it makes me wonder if something up on the deck could have caused the issues.

My thoughts immediately go to the control box for the Rain Maker, but that would be silly. I double back to find Stirling. He is following cables in the bottom of the hold. With each step I question myself more and more, *Have I doomed the ship?* “Do we have any idea of what the issue actually is?” I ask. I can tell Stirling is getting frustrated and borderline panicked.

“There’s no power to any of the pumps. Last time this happened one of the cables was broken.”

“Can we use an emergency cable run?” I ask. I know we have done that before, although the idea quickly dawns on me how silly it would be right at this moment.

“Not with this storm raging, going outside right now would be suicide.”

I ponder. “Could it be something on the deck? A switchboard that has tripped or something?” I ask, hoping this isn’t my fault.

Stirling shakes his head. “Not that I know of. You could ask Ash. This stuff is his part of the ship.” As Stirling returns to looking, I hear the ship's P.A. system warning us they are about to cut power to the hold. Stirling punches the foam padding on the bulkhead and drops his torch. The lights flicker and the room goes dark.

We hurry back towards the control room, along with other members of the crew. Most filter out into the ladder bays but Stirling moves like he is on a mission. His hands are

clenched into fists, and he pushes each door open, slamming it against the bulkheads. I can tell something is wrong.

“Stirling,” I say, hoping to get his attention. “Stirling, stop.” I grab his shoulder, but he flicks my hand away.

He barges into the control room and grabs Ash on the front of his shirt and pushes him against the switchboards. “Why did you cut the power?”

“Stirling, stop!” I call out but he ignores me.

“The engines were overheating; there’s no cooling. All we can do now is run the emergency lighting and half the pumps for fuel,” Ash states. Stirling releases his grip and steps back. He fixes his shirt then looks at us. “I think I may know where the issue is. I was just discussing it with Zoey.”

I turn and look but can’t see her anywhere. “She was here?”

“Yes, before. There’s a breaker panel on the forecastle.”

I look at him. “Near the Rain Maker?” I ask, my heart sinking.

“Yes, how do you know?” Both Ash and Stirling look at me. I freeze up for a moment.

“Dad... Dad showed me long ago,” I lie. I don’t want to admit all this could be my fault. “I know where it is.”

“Right, well, all the pumps were rewired up through that switchboard. If it tripped, then there’s a good chance it’s caused all the issues.”

Stirling looks over the *Rome*'s damage control map. "Is there any way to get there internally?"

Ash shakes his head. "No, there isn't. We have to go via the main deck. That's what I was discussing with Zoey."

As the words leave his mouth, I feel the draft again through the ship. I look up and Stirling and Ash notice it too. I turn and head for the stairwell; something isn't right and now I'm concerned. Ash and Stirling are behind me. I can hear them as they scramble up the ladder bay. I reach the main deck and the large steel doors are untied and rattling in the wind.

I race for the door and undo the latch. The door flies open and slams against the superstructure. The echo off the hull is almost deafening, but is quickly drowned out by the wind, and the sand as it blasts against my skin. "Zoey!"

Without warning I'm grabbed and hauled backwards.

"What are you doing?" Stirling shouts over the roar. It's hard to hear him, so I know I have to raise my voice.

"Zoey is out there!"

"You're going to get yourself killed, Kayla, it's a death sentence if you go out there."

Ash walks up behind Stirling. "If that breaker is tripped, it's a death sentence for all of us if nobody goes out there."

"Did Zoey know where it was?" Stirling asks.

"I don't think so."

"I'll go," Stirling states.

"Do you know?" Ash asks Stirling.

He shakes his head. "No but how hard can it be?"

"Visibility is zero out there. You'll be lucky to find Zoey, let alone the breaker box."

"I know exactly where it is," I tell them.

Stirling raises an eyebrow. "How?"

I sigh. "The breaker tripped is next to the forward mast. I turned it off this morning when I was closing the storm shutters."

"Why would you do that?" Ash asks. Stirling looks at me, rage in his eyes.

"The Rain Maker is broken, and everything to do with it has been turned off. That's what Dad told me. So, I turned off the breakers because that's what we do to all broken things. Turn them off at the breakers until they are fixed. Let me go."

Ash nods, then looks at Stirling. "Go get me two long ropes."

Stirling hesitates, then nods and runs to the boatswain's store. Ash removes his jumper, then pulls a pair of grinding goggles from his pocket and hands them to me. "When Stirling comes back, tie the rope around your waist; if you get stuck give it a tug and we will haul you back in. Find Zoey, give her the second rope, then go make the breaker."

I nod and comply as Stirling returns with the ropes. I tie it to my waste and wrap Ash's jumper around my face, then put the goggles on. I step into the threshold of the door and immediately get blasted with sand. It stings my hands, and I'm thankful for the goggles.

It's hard to walk; the wind is so strong, each step I feel my feet being swept out from under me. Sand covers the deck. It's slippery, but I push on. Even with my torch I struggle to see my hands. A dim glow extends from where the fog lights are, but I can't make out anything more than my hand in front of my face. I keep moving until I come in contact with the guard rails, then I stumble forward over something. I attempt to get my bearings and realise it's Zoey.

"Take the rope!" I yell, but soon realise she can't see. Her eyes are closed, and the skin on her face is red raw. I tie the second rope to her. I know she can't talk, but I know she can understand me. "Pull on the rope. Take it slow, and you will get back inside the *Rome*," I tell her, then help her to her feet.

Within a moment she disappears into the sand, and I turn back toward the guard rail. Lightning cracks overhead followed by a loud rumble of thunder. The rope gets snagged on something. I turn and try to free it, but as I do it breaks, and I fall onto the deck, injuring my leg. I reach down and feel something jagged, warm, and sticky. My skin feels raw like it's being sandblasted. I pull myself against the guard rails and struggle for what feels like an eternity.

Sand is getting in through the goggles; my eyes are filled with tears, and my breaths are short and sharp, but I make it to the forecandle. I pick the direction I remember the mast being in and crawl blindly. I have to do it; I have to make it for everyone onboard.

A few more moments pass, and I find the control box. I pull it open, but as I do the door flicks open and breaks off, flying away in the wind. I reach up and force the breaker to the on position, then take shelter in the small covered area under the Rain Maker. *I guess it really is broken*, I tell myself as I hear nothing from the machine. I don't feel like I can make it back from here, not without help. I feel safe out of the storm and hope that all the pumps have been restored.

I sit against the breaker box. I remove the jumper from around my face and use it to bandage my leg. I wince in pain, my raw sand-blasted skin not helping with the feeling. I hear something, a rumbling sound, then something like a steam pipe venting. I lean out and look up seeing a yellow cloud spewing from the Rain Maker. *It looks exactly as Dad described*.

It only lasts a moment until it stops and then there is nothing. I look down, disappointed. *It really must be broken*, I tell myself. It makes me think of Dad and how much I just wanted to see it work.

Tears well up in my eyes, and I pull the goggles off. The sand isn't blowing here where I am thankfully. I know my stupid mistake caused a lot of pain for everyone onboard, and I really hope the pumps are back on and more importantly, Zoey is okay. I feel a tear hit my hand, then another, I never wanted anyone to hurt and right now I really just want Dad. I wish he was here with me.

Another tear, I put my hand to my face, and another strikes the back of my hand. *The back of my hand?* I look at my hands, then my legs. I'm wet, these aren't tears. *It's water?*

It's raining.

I look up at the Rain Maker and a steady stream of yellow gas floods into the storm. The sand clears and visibility opens up. Lightning cracks all around, but I don't care. It's raining, and heavily. I put my tongue out, and taste the water. It's dirty but it's water, and it's falling from the sky. Tears stream down my face, but not of pain, of happiness. I look back across the deck towards the superstructure. It's just like I imagined, except now it's real.

Dad used to tell me about the rain. What it was like to watch the clouds bleed water and how the lifeblood of the land falls from the skies above. The Rain Maker works; I only wish he was here to see it.



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Review

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