Cartography for a Woman Who Doesn't Sink

By Karla Macias

The day the sea began to lie, Serena was the only one who noticed.

The nautical charts said one thing, the horizon another. Where there should have been a straight line, an impossible curve appeared, as if someone had folded the world with their fingers. Serena did not shout or turn back. She noted the error. Errors, she had learned, always meant something.

She had been sailing alone for three days. Not because she desired solitude, but because no one else agreed to join her when she said the sea was changing. "The sea doesn't change," they told her. "Only you do." That, of course, confirmed her suspicions.

As evening fell, the wind stopped abruptly. Not a natural calm, but a tense pause, like the silence before an uncomfortable question. The sailboat stood still. Serena checked the sails, the helm, the hull. Everything was in order. Too much in order. The water, dark and smooth, reflected the sky with an unsettling delay, as if it hesitated before imitating it.

Then she saw the buoy.

It appeared in no records: black, unnumbered, swaying against all logic, with not a single wave. Serena approached carefully and read what was handwritten on its side: OPTIONAL RETURN.

"How considerate," she murmured.

She tied up the boat.

The moment she touched the buoy, the sea regained its movement. The wind returned, but from the wrong direction. Serena did not fight it. She adjusted her course to take advantage of it. If the world had changed the rules, she would change the way she played.

The storm arrived without theatrics: first a fine drizzle, then a sky folding in on itself. The waves did not strike; they pushed, as if trying to persuade her of something. Serena maneuvered with precision, measuring force, yielding when necessary. She remembered all the times she had resisted on solid ground until she broke a little. Not here. Here, she understood the language.

A flash of lightning illuminated something impossible: another boat, identical to hers, sailing in the opposite direction.

Serena held her breath. She observed. She calculated. The other sailboat had a crack in the bow that hers did not. Not yet. As the vessels crossed, the woman at the helm of the other

boat looked straight at her. It was Serena too, but with the tired eyes of someone who had returned too many times.

“Don’t take the wrong exit,” the other said, without moving her lips.

And she disappeared.

The storm ceased abruptly. The sea remained unsettled, but honest. Serena rested her forehead against the helm, laughing and trembling at the same time. She no longer doubted it: this journey was not geographical. It was a boundary.

At dawn she reached a colorless zone. Neither blue nor gray. The water looked erased. The sailboat moved slowly, as if each meter asked permission. Serena shut off the motor. Some things are not crossed with noise.

At the center of that nothingness floated a door. Literally. Swollen wood, no frame, swaying with absurd dignity. Carved into it with a knife was a single word: STILLNESS.

Serena did not open it.

She anchored nearby and sat down to wait. Stillness did not terrify her; what she feared was using it to hide. Hours passed. Or minutes. Time there also seemed undecided. She thought of the other Serena. Of the crack. Of the versions of herself who had chosen to go back because moving forward was uncomfortable.

When the wind finally returned, it did not come from the sea, but from her.

She raised the sail and steered away from the door. The nothingness began to fill with color, first timidly, then fully. Behind her, the door sank without protest.

That night, beneath an honest sky, Serena wrote in her journal:

Not every discovery is meant to be crossed. Some are recognized and left behind.

The sailboat moved on with a new rhythm, steady and adaptable. Serena smiled, tired and lucid. The sea was no longer lying. And for the first time, neither was she.