

The Map Beneath the Blue Blanket



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For Leo and Mia—may you always find your way back to Blue Base, share the last apple slice, and remember that every good adventure is better together.

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The Map in the Blue Blanket

Rain scribbled across the apartment windows, erasing the park, the footbridge, and every other plan Leo had checked twice that morning.

Behind him, a dining chair scraped across the floor.

“Careful,” he said.

“I am careful.” Mia dragged it another half metre, bumping a cushion barricade. “I’m also faster than you.”

“At moving furniture into completely random positions, yes.”

“They’re not random. That’s the west tower.”

Leo turned from his abandoned list. Four chairs, six cushions, and

one faded blue blanket had swallowed most of the living room. Mia was already tunnelling underneath, humming as she clipped the blanket to a chair back.

The fort leaned sharply left.

Leo sighed, though not very convincingly, and straightened the nearest chair. “If we’re rebuilding Blue Base, it needs proper supports.”

Five minutes later, the blanket stretched overhead like a small blue sky. Mia crawled inside while Leo inspected the perimeter. One corner sagged. He lifted it—and felt something crackle within the thick folded hem.

A creased sheet of paper slipped onto the carpet.

Mia wriggled back out. “Treasure map!”

It was drawn on the reverse of an old grocery list: looping paths, jagged cliffs, and several invented landmarks in two different pencils. Leo remembered making it during another rainy afternoon.

“Historic document,” he said. “Slight water damage.”



“That was juice.”

“Which mysteriously poured itself over the entrance.”

“You put the cup in a crawling zone.” Mia snatched the page, then went still. “Leo. Look.”

Her finger rested on a crooked bird symbol beside a cluster of pencilled trees.

“It’s one of our pretend gulls,” he said.

“No. It’s the blue tile in the park—the one near the path. It has this exact bent wing.”

Leo opened his mouth to dismiss the coincidence. Instead, he studied the tiny angled line. Mia noticed things he walked past every day.

He carefully flattened the map against his list.

“When the rain eases,” he said, “we check the tile.”

“Supplies,” Leo announced, writing beneath CHECK TILE. “Map. Raincoats. Snack.”

“Expedition snack,” Mia corrected. She packed apple slices into a container, tucked it into her pocket, and added three pebbles she might need. The round green one was useful for decisions. The striped one looked like a tiny planet. The flat gray one was simply too good to leave behind.

Leo checked his list again. “Why is your pocket leaking apple juice?”

Mia pulled out the container. Inside, the slices had become a lopsided stack of apple pancakes.



Leo stared. “We haven’t even left.”

“They’ve survived crushing pressure,” Mia said. “Excellent expedition food.”

She moved the pebbles to her other pocket. Leo slid the old grocery-list map into a folder, then into his bag, as if two layers could make it official.

At the fort entrance, Mia raised one fist. “Blue Base rules.”

“Blue Base rules,” Leo agreed.

They ducked out from beneath the faded blanket and traded indoor socks for shoes. Beyond the apartment, the rain had softened to silver mist. Water ticked from balconies, and the pavement shone all the way toward the park.

Mia hurried ahead, her pebble pocket knocking against her leg.

“I inspect the tile first,” she called. “I found the symbol.”

“I carry the map,” Leo replied, catching up. “The map-holder checks the match.”

“That’s a rule you just invented.”

“It’s an extremely sensible rule.”

Mia grinned and lengthened her stride. “Then you’d better keep up, Map-Holder.”

Side by side, they splashed toward the park, each quietly determined to reach the blue gull first.



The Forgotten Quest

The park entrance smelled of wet leaves and sea-damp earth. Mia veered off the pavement before Leo had finished saying, “It could have been any blue—”

“There!”

At the base of a stone edging, moss covered everything except one sharp blue curve. Mia crouched and brushed the green fringe aside with two fingers. A tiled gull appeared, wings spread in three simple strokes.

Leo knelt beside her and took the folder from his bag. He held the grocery-list map near the tile, careful not to let either touch the wet ground. The crooked bird they had drawn during their old pretend adventure had the same hooked wing and pointed tail.

“That,” he said slowly, “is a match.”

Mia sprang up and performed a quick two-step victory dance. “Tiny detail: one. Doubting brother: zero.”

“Temporary score,” Leo said, but he was already examining the stones around the tile.

Mia noticed the dull corner of a metal plaque behind a curtain of dripping ivy. Together they pulled the leaves aside.

COASTAL QUEST, read the faded blue lettering. FOLLOW THE GULLS FROM PARK TO FOOTBRIDGE TO TIDEPOOL POINT.

“This was real?” Mia whispered.

“Still is, mostly,” said a familiar voice.

Ms. Reyes approached along the path. She explained that the old public puzzle route was no longer regularly advertised, but its paths remained open and safe. Several markers might be weathered or hidden.

“Does it actually reach the beach?” Leo asked.



“The information shelter above it. I’ll meet you there.” Ms. Reyes unfolded a tide card and tapped a time. “But both of you listen: stay on public paths, and do not step onto wet tidal rocks. Not even for a clue.”

Mia looked directly at her. “We won’t.”

Leo nodded too. “We’ll go as far as the footbridge first.”

Ms. Reyes waited another beat, then smiled. “Good. The next gull

should point the way.”

Mia turned toward the winding park paths. Leo tucked the map away without questioning her this time.

“Temporary score,” Mia reminded him, and they set off together.

At the first fork, Leo brought out the map. The left path curved among dripping trees; the right ran almost straight downhill.

“The bridge is east,” he said, lining the folder’s edge with the path. “Right is faster.”

“Then I’ll find the gull first.” Mia shot past him.

“Mia—public path, remember!”

“This is a public path!” she called, already widening the gap.

Leo hurried after her, checking the map again as he ran. The straight route made sense. Mostly. Yet there had been a small post at the fork, tilted toward the curving path. He had not stopped to inspect it because Mia had already been moving, and because the route he had chosen looked so obviously correct.

The path narrowed. Wet weeds brushed their legs. Mia skidded around a puddle and reached a wire maintenance gate plastered with a muddy KEEP CLEAR sign.



No bridge. No blue gull. Only stacked bins and the smell of damp leaves.

“You raced ahead without confirming anything,” Leo said.

“You picked the path without looking for the marker.”

“I checked the map twice.”

“And it was wrong twice.”

That landed harder than she probably meant it to. Leo stared at the crooked KEEP CLEAR sign, then straightened its dangling corner against the wire.

“Sorry,” Mia said quickly. “That was snippy.”

“I was snippy first.” He exhaled. “You’re right about the post. I saw it and ignored it.”

Mia scraped mud from one sneaker. “I saw little blue marks on the left tree. I ignored those because I wanted to beat you here.”

Leo folded the map. “New rule: neither of us chooses a fork until both confirm a gull.”

“Agreed. But whoever spots it first gets one point.”

“Naturally.”

They retraced their muddy footprints together. At the fork, the tilted post bore a faint blue wing, pointing left.



Under the Footbridge

The curving path delivered them to the footbridge, but the bridge offered no gull at all.

Leo stopped before stepping onto the wet boards. The stream slid beneath them, brown-green from the rain, carrying leaves between grassy banks. He checked the posts, the handrails, and the sign at the entrance. Mia checked too, more slowly this time.

“Nothing,” she said. “Confirmed by both investigators.”

“Then we’re looking wrong.” Leo took out the old map and his pencil. Its wobbly bridge symbol showed a gull beside three short lines. He sketched the real bridge beneath it, adding the bend in the stream and the leaning willow on the opposite bank.

The three lines matched the willow’s reflected branches—but only

from one spot.

“Stand by this post,” he said. “On the safe side. Don’t lean.”

Mia gave him a solemn salute and stayed exactly where he indicated. She began humming under her breath, turning her head as she studied the trembling picture in the water.

Leo shifted two steps downstream. His sketch said the missing marker ought to align beneath the middle railing. Yet all he saw below it was shadow.

“Wait,” Mia whispered. “The gull isn’t on the bridge. Not exactly.”

A ripple flattened. In the stream’s reflection, a blue gull appeared upside down beneath the rail—the painted mark itself hidden on the underside, but visible in the water.

“You found it,” Leo said. “I’d never have looked in the reflection.”

“And I wouldn’t have stood here without your drawing.” Her grin appeared. “One point each?”



“For now.”

Beside the gull, reversed letters shimmered across the stream. Leo copied their shapes while Mia read them in the water.

“SAFE,” she said. “SIDE. THIRD. POST.”

They hurried—not raced—to the third post at the bridge entrance. Behind it, sheltered beneath a small wooden lip, Leo found a metal compartment. Mia confirmed the blue wing scratched

beside its latch.

Together they opened it.

Inside lay a dry, weatherproof instruction card.

Mia held one corner while Leo flattened the card against the bridge rail. Across the top, a blue gull flew over faded words:

FOLLOW THE COASTAL QUEST TO TIDEPOOL POINT.
FINISHERS MAY SIGN THE VOYAGER'S BOOK.

Below was a drawing of a thick book inside a sealed capsule. Mia imagined page after page of names—children who had crossed this same bridge, watched the same shaky reflections, and hurried on toward the sea.

“We could put both our names in it,” she said.

“If it’s still there.” Leo traced the next section with one finger.

“Park edge, windy path, beach approach. Then Tidepool Point.”

Mia noticed a strip of newer writing along the bottom, squeezed into the margin in blue ink.



REPORT STORM DAMAGE OR MISSING MARKERS TO THE PARK STEWARD.

The card suddenly felt less like a prize and more like something left in their care. The compartment had been dry, but its latch was spotted with rust, and the quest had already lost one obvious marker.

“We should check the book,” Mia said. “Not just sign it. Make sure it’s safe.”

Leo read the route once, turned the card over, then read it again. Mia waited, rolling a smooth pebble inside her pocket.

“All public paths,” he said. “And we meet Ms. Reyes at the beach shelter.”

“Agreed. First landmark is mine to choose.”

His eyebrows rose. “Why?”

“Because you chose the wrong fork. Also because I found the reflection.”

“One point each, remember?”

“Fine. I choose the first landmark as my half-point.” Mia tapped the drawing of three bent trees beyond the bridge. “Those.”

Leo slid the instruction card safely into his folder. “We’ve got this.”

Together they left the bridge behind, following the public path toward the wind-shaped trees—and, beyond them, the Voyager’s Book.



Two Ways to the Sea

The three trees bent inland as if the wind had been giving them instructions for years. Mia marched toward them while Leo walked with one hand over his crossbody bag.

“You’ve checked the folder four times,” she said.

“Three.”

A gust charged up the path. Leo opened the folder to consult the map, and the old grocery list snapped from his fingers.

“Mia!”

The paper skimmed past a bench, heading for the stream below. Mia sprinted, pebbles thumping against her leg. She yanked her pocket inside out and slapped the heavy bundle onto the map just

as it caught against a bench leg.

“Pocket anchor,” she announced breathlessly.

Leo crouched beside her. A corner had torn, but the route remained intact. “Good catch.”

“Fast can be useful.”

“I noticed.” He tucked the map between two stiff cards before they continued.

Beyond the trees, a puddle spread from hedge to hedge, deep enough to swallow their shoes. Leo stopped Mia with an arm before she could test it.

“Public paths only,” he said, already sketching. A paved side route curved uphill and rejoined the trail farther on. “This should take us around.”

He led them up the slope. At the top, Mia hummed and scanned the posts below until a fleck of blue appeared beside a drain cover.

“Gull tile!” She pointed. “Your detour, my marker.”

“Confirmed by both,” Leo said.



They hurried down the far side as the wind shoved at their backs. Mia reached the beach approach first—and stopped.

The land opened suddenly. Gray-blue sea stretched beneath racing clouds, white edges flashing along the shore. Wind salted Mia's lips and whipped her long hair across her face.

Then a gust lifted a strip of blue ribbon from a distant post. It streamed sideways for one clear second, pointing onward.

“There!” Mia cried.

Leo checked the time and winced. Their meeting was closer now.

Mia grinned into the wind. “Then we’d better move.”

They raced to the ribbon, where the path split around a dune. One branch climbed between grass-lined posts. The other descended toward the broad wet sand.

A weathered wooden gull stood between them, its beak pointing uphill while one faded blue wing angled toward the beach.

“Upper path,” Leo said. He flattened the map against his folder. The marked public route curved above the shoreline, safely away from the tide. Clear, sensible, quick.

Mia crouched beside the post, humming under her breath. “Lower path.”

“You can’t confirm it from a crooked wing.”

“I’m not.” She pointed to tiny scratches along the gull’s base—three shells in a row, almost hidden beneath sand. “Those match the instruction card. The clue is down there.”

“The route is up there.”

“Because your map says so?”



“Because the posts say so, and we’re late.”

Mia stood. “You got to choose the puddle detour. It’s my turn.”

“That isn’t how safety works.”

Her mouth tightened. “And being older doesn’t make every guess yours.”

The words struck harder than the wind. Leo caught himself straightening the ribbon where it had twisted around its nail. “This isn’t about taking turns. I’m trying to make sure we don’t get stuck.”

“And I’m trying to solve the actual quest.”

A gust thumped the wooden gull sideways. It swung with a dry squeal until the beak pointed toward the sea.

They both stared.

Leo gripped the post and turned it gently. The whole marker rotated in its storm-loosened socket. Beak, wing, shells—none had a reliable direction anymore.

“Oh,” Mia said.

“Yeah.” His certainty drained away, leaving only two paths and racing clouds.

Rain began ticking against the folder. Up the slope, a shallow stone alcove offered shelter.

Leo nodded toward it. “We check the map and take a rubbing of the shells. Calmly.”

Mia hesitated, then nodded once. Together—but not quite side by side—they climbed out of the rain.



A New Blue Base

The alcove smelled of cool stone and salt. Rain stitched a silver curtain across its entrance, but the curved wall kept the floor dry. Mia sat at one end of the bench. Leo sat at the other, placing the map folder precisely between them.

Neither reached for it.

Mia rolled a pebble inside her pocket. The alcove was snug enough to hear the rain pattering overhead and the sea breathing below. It reminded her of dining chairs, dim blue light, and trying not to knock over another cup of juice.

“This is basically Blue Base,” she said.

Leo glanced around. “Stone Base.”

“No blanket.”

“Better roof.”

Mia considered. “Beach Blue Base.”

The edge of his mouth lifted. “Approved.”

The knot in her chest loosened, but not all the way. Leo straightened the folder, though it was already straight. “I made the upper path sound certain,” he said. “It wasn’t. Public and sensible, yes. Definitely the quest route, no.”

Mia studied her sneakers. “I made sensible sound like boring.” She nudged a grain of sand with one toe. “And I was treating your caution like it was only there to stop me.”

“Sometimes I overdo it.”

“Sometimes I make that very easy.”

He opened the snack packet and stared inside. “Speaking of things that have been overdone.”

The apple slices had become pale, damp crescents pressed almost flat by Mia’s pebbles. Leo lifted one carefully. It drooped over his finger.

“Oh no,” Mia whispered. “Another brave explorer lost.”

“Flattened in service.” He divided the worst pieces into two equal heaps on the wrapper. “Half an apple each.”



“Half an apple-shaped substance.”

They ate, trying not to laugh with their mouths full and failing.

When the packet was empty, Mia spread the shell rubbing beside Leo's map. “We test both?”

“First, whether the upper path matches the route shape. Then whether your shell marks continue toward the lower path.”

“And whichever has evidence leads.”

“Even if it’s yours.”

“Even if it’s yours,” Mia returned.

Outside, the rain softened. Leo slid the rubbing under the folder’s clear cover beside the old map. Mia stood and offered him a hand.

“Blue Base rules.”

He took it. “Blue Base rules.”

Outside Beach Blue Base, the shower had polished the world. Water shone on the dune grass, and the tide pools below held pieces of brightening sky.

Leo kept them on the marked path until it reached firm sand above the rocks. He opened the folder, shielding the grocery-list map from the breeze. Its wobbly pretend coastline had never been meant to match anything, yet when he turned it sideways, one curve nestled against Tidepool Point almost perfectly.

“Look,” he said. “The three bumps could be those pools.”

Mia crouched beside the nearest trail sign, humming under her breath. “Maybe. But these are definitely not accidents.”



Among the scratches in the wood were tiny shell shapes. Leo saw only weathered lines until she traced beside them without touching: one fan-shaped shell, then two spirals, then three narrow ovals.

“Natural scratches don’t count politely,” she said.

They followed the public path to the first three pools, staying on sand and the dry viewing platforms. Each pool’s sign carried one of the shell patterns. Leo numbered them on his sketch according to the coastline bumps—but the sequence still meant nothing.

Mia reached into her pockets. “May I handle the advanced equipment?”

Leo looked at her collection: a flat gray pebble, two striped ones, and three tiny pale stones. Yesterday he might have rearranged them himself.

“Your equipment,” he said. “You place it.”

At each sign, Mia set the matching number of pebbles into a shallow wooden groove. Leo checked the map order twice. “Third pool first. Then first. Then second.”

Mia moved the groups without arguing. For a moment they looked like scattered stones.

Then Leo stepped back. The three grooves aligned across the curved path, and the pebbles formed a long arrow.

It pointed beyond the last pool to a blue gull marker fixed high on a sturdy post.

Mia remained perfectly still until Leo said, “Confirmed.”

Her victory dance was quick and splashy-footed on the wet sand.
This time Leo joined for the final ridiculous hop.

Beneath the gull, faded letters read: FINAL STATION—VOYAGER'S
BOOK.

“We’ve got this,” Leo said, closing the folder.

Together, they hurried toward it.



Where the Book Went

Mia reached the post first by half a step and swept one hand toward it. “Joint victory,” she announced, though she had already prepared the opening move of another dance.

Then she saw the bracket.

It was bolted beneath the gull marker, bent outward as if the storm had tugged it with enormous fingers. A black strap hung from one side, its buckle empty. There was no sealed capsule. No Voyager’s Book.

Leo stopped beside her. “That’s not good.”

The dance vanished from Mia’s feet. “Maybe Ms. Reyes took it for safekeeping?”

“Then she’d probably have left a notice.” Leo crouched without touching the damaged metal. He opened the protective folder and drew the post, the warped bracket, and the loose strap. Beside them he wrote: STORM DAMAGE—CAPSULE MISSING.

Mia circled the station. On the seaward side, pale scrapes cut through the dirt and flattened grass. They ran downhill, as though something heavy had bounced away.

“Leo.”

He came around, following her finger. His expression changed from disappointment to concentration. “We need to report this.”

“But first we need to know what we’re reporting.”

Mia knelt at the edge of the marked path and hummed under her breath. The scrape trail faded among low bushes, but one twig held a thread so fine she almost mistook it for reflected sky.

“Blue fiber,” she said.

Leo leaned close. “The capsule cord?”

A second strand clung farther down. Beyond it, another flashed against a stone.



They followed along the safe upper path, Mia spotting each blue wisp while Leo marked dotted lines on his map. The ground dropped toward the sea, but a railing kept them well back from the wet rocks.

Ahead, waves made a hollow rushing sound.

The last fiber pointed toward a narrow channel between two dark rock shelves. Mia gripped the railing and searched below.

Somewhere in that channel, the Voyager's Book had gone.

"There!" Mia pointed so sharply that Leo nearly looked past it.

At first he saw only foam sliding between the rocks. Then the water drained back, uncovering a gray cylinder wedged sideways in the channel. A blue cord trailed from one end, looped around a blunt spur of stone.

"The capsule." Leo's pulse jumped. "You found it."

It looked absurdly close—below the railing, across a sloping shelf, then perhaps three careful steps to the channel. He took out his map and sketched the rocks, marking the cylinder with a circle. The next surge rushed in, not enormous, but strong enough to bury the shelf in churning white water.

Mia leaned between two railing posts. "When it goes out, we could—"

"No." The answer came too quickly. Leo softened it. "Those rocks are wet."

They both looked again.

Water slipped away in silver ribbons, leaving the shelf shining. Leo traced possible approaches with his pencil. From the left, a patch of seaweed covered the first foothold. From the right, the channel narrowed, but the only path crossed a dark strip that each surge swallowed. Straight down was steepest.

Every dotted route ended on tidal rock.



Ms. Reyes's warning returned with annoying clarity: stay off wet tidal rocks. She had waited until both of them acknowledged it. Leo had said yes.

Still, the capsule was right there. The Voyager's Book was right

there. If they ran to the information shelter, they would lose minutes. Ms. Reyes might arrive too late, and their quest would end with a circle on a map showing where the book used to be.

“We could reach the cord without going all the way down,” he said, testing the idea aloud.

“With what?” Mia asked.

Leo searched the path: no fallen branch, no safe angle, nothing useful. Only the railing beneath his hand and the capsule rocking below.

A deeper rush sounded inside the channel. Water surged over both shelves and struck the cylinder. The blue cord snapped taut, slipped free of the spur, and vanished under foam.

When the surge withdrew, the capsule reappeared farther out, trembling near the channel mouth.

Leo closed his fingers around the map. The safe choice had just become the slower one.

Leo leaned past the railing, not over it exactly, but far enough that Mia saw his weight shift toward the rocks.

She grabbed his sleeve.

He froze. Below them, the capsule knocked once against stone. The blue cord flickered through the foam like a tiny signal.

“I was thinking it too,” Mia blurted.

Leo looked at her hand, then at her.

“Running down there,” she said. “Fast enough to grab it before the next wave. I thought I could win.” Saying it made her stomach pinch. Ms. Reyes had not made the rule because she doubted them. She had made it because wet rocks did not care who was quicker.



Another surge hissed into the channel. Mia tightened her grip. “But this isn’t a bravery contest.”

Leo eased back onto both feet. He did not argue or tell her he had only wanted a better view.

“Blue Base rules,” Mia said.

His worried expression shifted. “Which rule?”

“The one where we don’t do something ridiculous just because the treasure is close.”

“We may not have written that rule.”

“We have now. We get Ms. Reyes, and we come back together.”

Leo nodded once. “Show me exactly where the cord surfaced.”

He opened the protected map against the railing. Mia pointed to the channel mouth, the rock spur, and the patch where the foam curled backward. Leo marked each place, then added a dotted line showing the capsule’s last movement.

A wave lifted it again.

“Got it,” he said, snapping the folder shut. “Run.”

They raced up the marked path side by side, Mia’s pebbles rattling in her pockets. The shelter roof appeared beyond the sand steps.

“Ms. Reyes!” they shouted together.



The Tide-Clock Race

Ms. Reyes stepped from the shelter as they charged up the last sand steps. Leo's lungs burned, but he kept the map folder clamped beneath his arm.

"The capsule's in a tidal channel," he said. "Past the final station."

"The bracket's bent," Mia added. "It's moving toward the channel mouth."

Ms. Reyes unfolded her tide card and tapped the time. "Did either of you go onto the wet rocks?"

"No," they said together.

Leo swallowed. The quickest version of the story could have ended there. Instead, he said, "We nearly did. I was looking for a route."

“And I wanted to dash across,” Mia said. “I stopped him, but I needed stopping too.”

Ms. Reyes looked from one to the other. “Thank you for telling me. And for staying up high.” She pointed to the map. “Show me.”

Leo spread it across the shelter counter. Mia held down the torn corner while he traced their safe approach, avoiding the twisted marker and the lower fork. “We came back by the upper route. The cord surfaced here, beside this spur.”

“And the foam curls backward here,” Mia said, tapping his mark. “That’s where we saw it last.”

Ms. Reyes studied the page only a moment. “Clear observations. Keep watching from behind the railing. I’ll do the reaching.”

She opened a locked storage cabinet and drew out a long retrieval pole with a hooked end. Suddenly asking for help did not feel like giving the adventure away. It felt like adding the one thing their plan had been missing.

They set off at once. Leo led them past the first dune post; Mia called the turn where the upper marker ribbon snapped in the wind. Behind them came the steady thud of Ms. Reyes’s waterproof boots and the soft rattle of the pole.

Ahead, beyond the rise, another surge boomed into the channel.

Leo reached the railing and looked down. The capsule was still there, knocking softly against the channel wall, but the blue cord vanished beneath a churn of foam.



Ms. Reyes lowered the pole without extending it over the rocks. “A blind reach may push it farther in. Tell me what the water is doing.”

Leo opened the map on the flat top of the warning notice. Its board

sat crooked on one bolt. While Mia leaned over the railing—feet firmly behind the painted safety line—he straightened the board, then set his pencil point beside the backward-curling foam patch.

A surge rushed in. He counted under his breath. Water climbed around the rock spur, paused, and drained away.

“Eleven seconds,” he said. The next interval lasted eight. The one after that, nearly twelve. Not a perfect pattern, but perhaps enough for a safe attempt. He drew three narrow bars along the channel.

Beside him, Mia hummed as she watched. “Cord!”

A blue loop flashed near the spur, then disappeared.

“Where exactly?” Leo asked.

“Left of the pale crack. But it comes up farther right when the water pulls back.”

He started to mark both positions, then stopped. Two guesses in one pencil would look like one uncertain mess.

“We’ve got this,” he said.

Mia glanced sideways at him. “You said that very nervously.”

Leo pressed the map flat. “That’s because I usually say it when I’m nervous.” Admitting it made his stomach flutter harder, but he slid his spare pencil toward her. “Your observations. Which one do we

test first—the pale crack or where the cord drifts on the pullback?”

Mia’s fingers closed around the pencil. “The pullback. It stays visible longer then.”

They watched another surge. Leo counted the draining seconds while Mia marked the cord’s path in blue. Twice more they tested it. Both times, her line crossed his longest calm interval beside the same notch in the spur.

“There,” Leo said.

“There,” Mia agreed.



Ms. Reyes studied their two-colored plan. She tapped the safe overlook on the page, then the crossing point. “Leo gives me the moment. Mia gives me the target. I reach from here.”

She extended the hooked pole over the channel.

Below, the foam began to thin.

Mia’s hum narrowed to one low note. The capsule bumped beneath the surface, vanished, then flashed silver-gray through

the draining water.

“Ten,” Leo said. “Nine. Eight.”

Ms. Reyes held the pole steady above the channel. Wind trembled its hooked end, but her waterproof boots stayed planted well back from the railing.

Mia ignored the capsule. The cord mattered. It would rise beside the pale crack, drift right, then—

Blue flickered in the foam.

“Six,” Leo counted. “Five—”

“Not yet,” Mia said. The loop flattened against the rock, too low for the hook. Her humming began again as water streamed backward through the narrow channel. “Wait... wait...”

The cord lifted and curled around the spur’s notch exactly where both pencil lines crossed.

“Now!” Mia cried.

“Three seconds!” Leo called.

Ms. Reyes lowered the pole. The hook clicked against rock and missed. Mia’s breath caught. The blue loop began to slide.



“Left—just left!”

Ms. Reyes twisted her wrists. The hook dipped, caught, and drew the cord tight.

“One!” Leo shouted.

The next surge rushed white into the channel as Ms. Reyes hauled backward. For one awful instant, the capsule knocked against the spur and stuck. Then it popped free, swung beneath the pole, and

rose dripping above the foam.

Ms. Reyes brought it over the railing onto solid ground.

Mia whooped so loudly that a gull on the beach flapped away in protest. Leo's count dissolved into laughter. They grabbed each other's hands and performed a victory dance that was half Mia's usual bounce, half Leo trying not to step in the mud—and therefore stepping directly into it.

"Elegant," Mia said breathlessly.

"Perfectly mapped," Leo replied.

The capsule was scratched but sealed. Ms. Reyes dried the lid with a cloth and opened it carefully. Inside, protected by its weatherproof cover, lay the Voyager's Book.

Its pages were intact.

Mia leaned beside Leo as Ms. Reyes turned them: dates, blue gull stamps, crooked drawings, cheerful notes from walkers who had followed the same paths in sun, mist, and wind. Years of adventures had nearly floated out to sea. Now they rested safely beneath three muddy hands.

Ms. Reyes smiled. "I believe there's room for another entry."

Mia looked at Leo. Leo looked at her.

Neither asked who had won.



Another Story for Blue Base

Back at the shelter, Ms. Reyes spread the capsule parts on a folded cloth to dry. Beside them, she wrote a repair report for the storm-bent bracket, including Leo's sketch of the channel and Mia's note about the blue fibers.

Mia and Leo bent over the Voyager's Book. One entry showed a family caught in a sun shower. Another included a drawing of a gull stealing someone's sandwich. Mia laughed so hard at an account of three wrong turns around the footbridge that Leo quietly covered the muddy corner of his own map.

Then Ms. Reyes passed them a blank page.

They wrote in turns. Mia described spotting the blue gull tile. Leo recorded the bridge reflection. They included the muddy dead end, the wind, the tide-pool clues, and the capsule

rescue—especially the part where they fetched help instead of crossing the rocks.

At the bottom waited a printed line:

TEAM CAPTAIN: _____

Mia's pencil stopped. Once, she would have written her name before Leo could object. She glanced at him.

"We could put whoever found the first clue," she suggested.

"Or whoever drew the rescue plan."

"Two pencils drew it."

Leo smiled. "Exactly."

Together, they crossed out TEAM CAPTAIN. Above it, Mia wrote TEAM, and Leo added CAPTAINS. They signed their names side by side.

Ms. Reyes read the entry, then opened a small blue ink pad. "Accurate," she said. "And properly reported."



She pressed the old gull stamp onto the back of their grocery-list map. When she lifted it, a neat blue bird spread its wings beside the torn edge.

Mia did one quick victory bounce. Leo straightened the map on the table, but he left both their signatures exactly as they were.

“Official now,” Mia said.

“Officially muddy,” Leo corrected, folding the stamped map

carefully for the journey home.

By the time they reached the apartment, their hems were damp and Mia's last apple slices had become one mysterious, lumpy sheet.

Blue Base went up faster than ever. Leo anchored the faded blue blanket over two dining chairs while Mia crawled beneath it, narrowly avoiding the place where a cup of juice had once met disaster.

"No beverages admitted," Leo said.

"That rule came too late."

Inside, he taped the torn grocery-list map flat. The blue gull stamp spread its wings near the mended edge. Beside it he pinned his new sketch: apartment, park, footbridge, beach, Tidepool Point. Mia added a tiny capsule and two pencils pointing toward it.

Leo shifted the second map until its edge lined up with the first.

"There," he said.

Mia produced the apple sheet. "Emergency rations survived."

"'Survived' is a strong word." He tore it down the middle. One half contained a pebble-shaped dent.



They ate solemnly, as if judging rare expedition food.

“Hints of apple,” Mia announced.

“Hints of pocket.”

Rain whispered against the windows. Under the blanket, the stamped map and the fresh route made the old fort feel like a headquarters rather than a hiding place.

Mia lifted her flattened slice. “Blue Base rules.”

“Blue Base rules,” Leo agreed, tapping his slice against hers.

“Our next map should be called The Captains’ Coastal Challenge.”

“Too many C’s. The Blue Gull Expedition.”

“I found the gull.”

“I drew the route.”

Mia grinned. “Two titles?”

Leo reached for a clean sheet of paper. “Two pencils.”