The Night Shift at the Station (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

Maria had worked at the mountain rescue centre for eleven winters, and she still could not sleep properly on stormy nights. The building stood at the end of a narrow road, half buried in snow from November onwards. Inside, the radios hummed quietly on a long wooden desk. On the wall hung photographs of every team she had ever trained.

That February, the centre was short of volunteers, so the director had decided to recruit six new members from the surrounding villages. Maria was asked to test them herself. She explained that fitness was only the first requirement, and that judgement mattered far more than strength. Two candidates left after the first weekend. The others stayed, sat through long evenings of theory, and slowly began to understand what the job actually involved.

The centre had built a serious reputation over the years, partly because of its record and partly because of the local newspapers. Their reporting was usually generous, describing dramatic rescues in the snow and printing photographs of exhausted volunteers. Maria found the articles slightly embarrassing. Most of the work, she told the newcomers, was cold, slow and unglamorous. You walked for hours, you found nothing, and you walked back.

One night in March, a call came in at half past two. A skier had failed to reach the village before dark and had not been seen since. The receiver of the phone at the other end sounded very young and very frightened. Maria wrote down the details calmly, checked the map, and studied the regional weather report, which warned of high winds above two thousand metres. She could recall the exact same conditions from an accident five years earlier, and the memory made her uneasy. She called the team out anyway.

They searched in two groups across a wide range of open ground, keeping in radio contact every ten minutes. The new volunteers performed better than she had expected, and their steadiness reinforced her belief that the training had been worth every difficult hour. Just before dawn, one of them spotted a red glove near a frozen stream. The skier was found twenty metres below, cold but conscious, with a broken ankle. Maria never allowed herself to celebrate too early, though this time she permitted a small smile. Later, over hot coffee at the centre, one of the recruits admitted that he had almost given up during the first weekend. He said he would always regret how close he had come to quitting. Maria laughed and told him that everyone thinks about leaving at some point. What mattered, she said, was that the team could rely on each other when it counted. There had been a reduction in the centre's budget that year, and equipment was old, but nobody complained. The mountains, she reckoned, did not care about money.

Woordenlijst

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