

IN LOVE WITH THE STORM



When the Sky Kissed the Sea

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Prologue



Night fell like a sheet of velvet over the coast, and the lighthouse of Marenveil lifted its bright eye as though to greet the darkness by name. Below, the waves traced silver furrows that glittered under the moon, and the wind carried the scent of kelp and wet stone through the winding streets of the little town. Heroine Marenveil stood barefoot on the cliff wall, her dress damp at the ankles from spray, listening. She always said the sea sometimes sang—not to everyone, but to those who carried an answer somewhere inside them.

Tonight, it sang.

At first, softly, as if muffled in a coat sleeve, then louder, until the sound trembled like a taut string stretched

between her heart and the horizon. Something shifted in the air: the charged weight before a storm, the delicate crackle of a promise. Above the water, clouds rose as tall as cathedrals, and light flickered between them. No thunder yet—only a distant whisper, the sky taking a breath.

“You should come in, child,” her father called from the tower window, his voice roughened by years and salt. “The storm’s turning.”

Heroine raised a hand in reply. “Just a moment,” she called back—meaning, impossibly, one more breath, one more wave, one more glance at the place where the world tilts into wonder.

Then she saw the sail.

A dark wedge fought against the rising sea; a vessel too slight for the weather’s temper, too proud to seek the bay in time. The wind tore at the rigging, the yard groaned, and the lighthouse’s beam slid like a guiding hand over the mast, over the slick planks, over a figure at the rail bracing against the gale.

Something in her leapt alight, as if struck by the spark of a memory that could not exist. She did not know the stranger on that tossing deck—yet felt a strange, lucid pull, as though her steps had always known the way to him.

The first thunder rolled in, breaking across the sea and pounding against the cliffs like a drum. Spray leapt high; cold rain brushed her cheeks. Behind her, her father hurried down the stairs, flung the heavy door wide, and his cry to the men at the harbor—Ropes! Lanterns! Blankets!—mingled with barking dogs and the peal of the small bell that meant help was needed. Windows flew open, shadows became people, and from the stillness of the night grew a chorus of voices and running feet.

Heroine ran.

Down the path between wild rose hips and beach grass, over slick stones, past Violetta Duclair, who rushed forward with a coat and a lantern. "Have you lost your mind?" Violetta gasped, but her eyes shone, and she followed—as she always did when Heroine's heart spoke louder than reason.

"There's someone out there," Heroine shouted into the wind, "and the sea will take him if we're not faster."

On the shore the men were already at the boats, oars rattling, the tide surging heavy onto the shingle. Adrien Moreau, neat even in haste, strode into the surf, trousers dark at the calves. "Back!" he called. "This is no place for you."

She didn't stop. "Then make it a place for all of us," she answered—not in defiance, but in necessity. Adrien blinked, as if the wind had thrown grit into his eyes, and caught up a rope.

The boat plunged into the waves like a young stallion. Two men took the oars, Adrien the bow, her father the stern with a lantern hooked to the side. Heroine gripped the second rope still tied to shore, her hands burning from the wet hemp, Violetta braced beside her, both as steadfast as mooring posts against the pull of the tide. Rain came now in slanting strokes, the sky tearing open. Between two lightning flashes she saw the ship close: the shattered yard, the flogging sail—and she stopped breathing. A young man pitched over the rail, like a word shouted too late.

"There!" she cried, the sea swallowing the rest.

The boat dipped, the lantern swung in a gold arc, shouts and oar strokes blurred into the roar of the wind. A rope flew, vanished, surfaced again. Then—a shadow amid

foam and dark, an arm finding the line, a hand closing with a grip that seemed to seize her own heart. The men hauled, cursing, slipping. The boat listed, righted. And at last he lay there, half in water, half in wood, hair like black kelp against his brow, lashes heavy with rain, mouth open as if tasting air for the first time.

“Is he alive?” Violetta’s voice was almost a prayer.

“He’s alive,” her father said, his voice gentle, as if to an injured seabird. “Help us, girls!”

They pulled until the stranger lay on wet shingle. Heroine knelt beside him, wrapped her coat over his shoulders, while Adrien, breath hard, ordered the men, bringing shape to the chaos. Another thunderclap, closer, and the ship beyond finally broke—a long, rending cry in the timbers that made the sea shudder. The tide claimed what it would.

The stranger coughed. A harsh sound at first, then clearer. His eyes opened—grey, as though they had just drunk the fog; yet warm, as if they knew the name of summer. He looked at Heroine as though he had searched a long time for exactly this face.

“Where... am I?” he asked hoarsely, his accent laying soft shadows under the words.

“In Marenveil,” she said, as if the name needed holding before it was swept away. “On the coast. You’re safe now.”

“Safe,” he echoed, tasting the word. Then a faint smile touched his lips. “A beautiful song.”

“He’s delirious,” Adrien murmured, not unkindly. “Take him to Widow Saint-Cyr’s. There’s room and warmth.”

They lifted him. He winced, as if his ribs ached, yet laid one hand lightly on Heroine’s coat—a gesture more than

a touch. “What is the name... of the lighthouse angel?” he asked, and Violetta gave a startled, delighted laugh.

Heat rose to Heroine’s cheeks despite wind and rain. “Heroine,” she said. “Heroine Marenveil.”

“Lucien,” he breathed. “Lucien d’Aubremont.”

The sky split open—one last searing bolt that turned the whole bay to white. For a heartbeat, Heroine saw it all in perfect clarity: the water like shattered glass, the droplets on Lucien’s lashes, the winter buried in Adrien’s gaze, and the unshaken line of the lighthouse, as if it could endure any storm.

Then darkness softened over them again. The rain eased, as though the sky had grown gentle. And as the men bore Lucien away, Heroine walked beside him, her coat snug around his shoulders, eyes fixed ahead—and somewhere, very faintly, the sea sang a new refrain.

It sounded like a beginning.



Chapter 1

The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter



The sea had not slept that night. Its breath still lingered over the stones of Marenveil, damp and salty, as I stepped out through the small door of the lighthouse. The steps beneath my feet were still cold from the darkness, and the first light of morning broke hesitantly through the lead-grey sky. I loved this hour—when the world had not yet decided whether it wanted to be day or keep on dreaming.

The wind played with my hair, tugging as if to remind me that it was stronger than I. I pulled the coarse wool scarf tighter around my shoulders and drew in a deep breath. It smelled of kelp, of shells, of the fine metallic trace of a storm still lurking far out to sea.

My father was already at the top, in the lantern of the tower. I could see his shadow—tall and angular—bent over the mechanism, checking whether the light that had guided ships through the night might now rest. It was his ritual, one I had known since I was small: to treat every screw, every chain, every lens with a kind of tenderness, as if the tower itself were a living thing entrusted to his care.

I followed the narrow stair up, letting my hand glide along the wooden rail, warm in places where his hand had been. When I reached the top, he gave me only a brief smile without lifting his eyes from his work.

“The wind’s turning,” he murmured, and I knew that meant: somewhere, far beyond the horizon, something was taking shape. “There’ll be weather in three days.”

He spoke of the weather the way others spoke of the visit of an old friend—inevitable, familiar, yet worthy of respect.

I kept silent, leaning against the railing to look out. The sea was not yet glittering; it lay dark, with fine, restless ripples, like a body shifting in its sleep. On the far line where water and sky kissed, I thought I saw a shadow. Perhaps a ship. Perhaps only a trick of the light.

For weeks I had felt as though I stood at the edge of something. Something unseen, slumbering in the distance, and yet already knowing the rhythm of my heartbeat.

“Did you sleep badly?” my father asked casually, without looking up.

“I dreamed,” I said, leaving the rest unsaid. For how could I explain that in my dream I had stood on the shore, hearing a melody so clear and yet so elusive that I woke with the feeling it had sunk into my skin?

I lingered a while longer as he extinguished the light. The lens gave one last faint glint, as if secretly winking at me

before the day swallowed it.

The stairway down smelled of oil and salt. At the base, the air was warmer, laced with the scent of bread I had baked the night before. I broke off a piece and bit into it as I stepped out into the day. The first villagers were already about—fishermen checking their nets, women carrying baskets of laundry.

“Heroine!” called the shell merchant. She beckoned me over and held out a single large, pearlescent shell.

“Listen.”

I pressed it to my ear. A distant, rushing murmur—the sea, caught in a small piece of chalk and shell. But this time it sounded different. Deeper. Almost like a voice. “A storm-heart,” she said softly, as though speaking of something forbidden. “That’s what we call it when the ocean carries not just water, but a heart that beats. Listen to its rhythm.”

I handed the shell back, a little embarrassed, and went on my way. Yet the sound lingered in my mind like an echo.

Later in the morning I stood at the cliff’s edge. The wind had eased, and the sun fought its way through the grey. Below me, waves struck the rock—foaming, greedy, as if they meant to devour it.

I pulled my coat tighter and closed my eyes. The salt on my lips tasted different today—sharper, almost sweet. And far away, I thought I heard something again. No wind, no gull’s cry. Something that began as a single, low note and arched upward, delicate yet powerful.

It was as if the sea itself were breathing—and in that breath, promising me something.

Perhaps it was only imagination, perhaps a trick of my own longing. But it felt as though that sound had touched a place within me no one else had ever found.

I took the narrow path down to the shore, where the water pooled in small coves and polished the stones smooth and round. It was quieter there, sheltered from the wind, and I could listen to the murmur that lived between the rocks.

I knelt, touching the water with my fingertips. It was colder than it should have been for the season. Small waves broke against my knuckles, as if playfully trying to push me away. I didn't pull my hand back.

Far out, beyond the bay, I noticed a dark shape. No sail, no boat. It moved irregularly, as though tossed by the water itself.

A faint shiver crawled up my spine, though no wind stirred.

The afternoon stretched on. In the village, life was as even-paced as ever: voices ringing over the market, the dull thud of hammers at the boatyard, children darting between baskets and barrels. I greeted, I smiled, I acted as though I belonged entirely here. Yet inside I was already back at the shore, with that dark shape that might have been nothing more than the sea's whim—or perhaps an omen.

On the way back to the tower I met Madame Séraphine. She stood in the middle of the path as though waiting for me, leaning on her long, curved stick. Her eyes were a pale, almost translucent grey, yet they seemed to read straight through me.

"The sea has shown you something, hasn't it?" she asked, without greeting.

I said nothing.

"Be careful, child. Sometimes it doesn't call to bring you gifts. Sometimes it calls to take something away."

She passed by so softly her steps made no sound in the

gravel. I stood there until she vanished into an alley.

Evening came quickly. Clouds had slid before the sun, and the light fell pale over the water. I sat on the wall before the tower, my gaze fixed on the open sea. The dark shape was gone, yet the sense that something out there was coming toward me had never been stronger.

Then it happened. A single, deep sound—little more than a whisper—floated across from the water. So faint I might have taken it for fancy, yet my heart answered as though it had always known it.

I closed my eyes, and in the darkness behind my lids I saw something: hands reaching through water as if trying to touch the sky.

My father called me to supper, and I rose reluctantly. Inside, the lamp was lit, the table set, bread and soup waiting. I tried to focus on his words, but my gaze kept drifting to the small window, beyond which the sea lay now in twilight.

“You’re somewhere else again,” he said, setting down his spoon.

I gave a faint smile. “Maybe I’ve breathed in too much salt.”

He didn’t reply, but I felt his measuring look, as though he wanted to speak words he couldn’t quite find.

Later, after he had gone to bed, I slipped outside again. The sky had cleared, stars scattered like spilled grains of salt over the sea. The moon hung low, its light laying a silver path across the water, a path one could follow.

And far out, at the edge of that path, something moved again.

This time I was certain it wasn’t a shadow. Something in the way it moved was too deliberate, too alive. It wasn’t fighting the waves—it seemed to be breathing with them.

I felt the cold, smooth wood of the post beneath my hand as I leaned forward. The wind brushed my cheek, gentle as a familiar touch. In the distance, something glimmered—not light exactly, but a gleam, as though the water had for an instant taken the shape of an eye.

My breath caught.

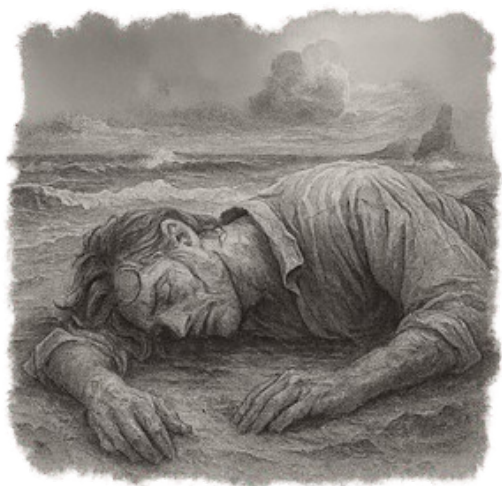
I don't know how long I stood there. The sea sighed, the stars glittered, and out there was this thing that would not let me go. My skin tingled, as though the salt had sunk deeper, beneath the skin, into the blood.

A warm, flickering thought shot through me: perhaps what waited out there wasn't only a story. Perhaps it was someone.

Someone whose voice I had already heard—even if only in my dreams.

I didn't return to the house until just before dawn, lying down fully clothed and listening for a long time to the surf. It was no longer just a sound. It was a call.

And deep inside, I knew: if it called to me again, I would answer.



Chapter 2 **The Castaway**



The morning after the storm did not smell of renewal, but of a silence too heavy to breathe easily. No gull's cry pierced the sky, no voices drifted up from the village. Only the slow, weary in-and-out breathing of the sea, as though it, too, had fought through the night and now lay spent at the edge of the world.

I stood for a long time on the lighthouse threshold, barefoot, the cold stone edge under my soles, letting my gaze travel down to the shore. The sky was a washed-out grey that dissolved into pale silver at the edges, and where the sun should have been there was only a milky blur behind a thin veil of cloud. The light was strange—it did not fall, but seemed to hover, as if drawn from the air

itself rather than from above.

The wind, usually so faithful in tearing my hair from my face, was gone. It was not a wind day. And it was precisely that absence that made the air feel heavy, as if it stood waiting for something.

I pulled my light cloak tighter around my shoulders and began the descent along the narrow path that wound between heather and rock. My feet knew every stone, every edge, yet today everything seemed differently arranged, as though the storm had reshaped not only the sea but the very coastline.

On the beach lay wreckage like the bones of some strange creature, washed up and broken. Planks, ends of rope, half a mast—and scattered among them, a glittering crust of salt, laid in fine scales over everything. I smelled wet kelp, distant spray, and beneath it something metallic, foreign to this place.

I had meant only to check the nets, in case the storm had torn them loose. But before I could take my first step onto the damp ribbon of sand, I stopped.

Something lay there, a little farther on, beyond the curve where the beach formed a small hook and the rocks sheltered a windless hollow. Something dark, lapped by the water.

My heart made that peculiar movement that is not fear, but the sudden certainty you have found what you weren't looking for—and that it will nonetheless change you.

I drew closer. Every step in the sand made a muffled sound that the wet skin of the shore swallowed at once. My hand went to my throat, as though to feel the warmth there, to confirm I was still here.

It was a body.

A man, as if laid there by the sea itself, turned on his side, his face half in shadow, half in the trembling afterglow of the spray. His hair clung black and heavy to his brow; his skin was so pale that the salt upon it gleamed like fine glass.

And he was not dead. I knew it before I saw his chest rise. Something in the air around him was too alive, too charged.

I knelt beside him, my damp cloak soaking up the sand at once. Carefully, I brushed the hair from his face. Beneath the salt something golden seemed to glimmer, as though tiny grains of light had found their way into his skin.

His breathing was shallow, and when I pressed my fingers to his neck, I found a pulse—weak, but steady.

“Can you hear me?” My voice was softer than the sea.

No answer. Only the faintest stir in his eyelids, as if he dreamed deep enough that no call could reach him.

I shook his shoulder lightly. The muscle beneath was rope-hard, tense from an effort he could not have made here on land. And then—as my hand touched him—a breeze rose, so slight it barely moved the sand, yet it felt as though it had come from far away, across cold waters and untouched currents.

A shiver went through me, and not from the damp.

His weight was unexpectedly warm under my hands, as if the sea’s cold had not entirely claimed him. The fabric of his clothing—if the tattered remnants could still be called that—was heavy with saltwater, clinging to his skin, and what showed beneath caught the dim light as though dusted with something finer than sand, more like powdered shell or light itself, caught and left clinging to him.

I eased away a strip of cloth wrapped around his torso—perhaps a scrap of sail the storm had wound about him. Underneath, I found a narrow wound along his side, not deep, but cleanly cut, as though by something sharp that had grazed him. No blood flowed; the cold had stilled it. Yet around the wound was a fine silvery rim, like a fragile crown of salt.

“You have to wake up...” My voice sounded strange in my own ears, as if I had not decided to speak, but the words had simply fallen into the space between us.

A tremor passed through his fingers—no more than the touch of a wave to a loose blade of kelp. His lids shifted, opening a fraction. And beneath them was a gaze that did not meet only my eyes, but went deeper, as though something in me had been opened that I had never fully closed.

In that diffuse light, I could not name their color; they were like the sea on a day when sun and storm wrestle—shifting, fathomless.

“You...” The word was barely a breath, and I could not tell whether he spoke to me or to someone he saw beyond me.

A sudden gust caught my hair, twisting it into thin strands that whipped across my face. I smelled something not of the shore—not kelp, not salt, but a far, warm scent, like sun-dried wood and a trace of something sweet I could not name.

I slid my arm beneath his back, feeling his weight, feeling his breath move against my shoulder. Each motion seemed to alter the air around us, as if invisible currents moved through us both.

Above us, a gull cried—the first sound of the morning. And it was as though that call loosed a thread: the sea

took up its rhythm again, the waves broke with an audible sigh, and the sky opened a little more to its pale light.

“Hold on...” I did not know if I said it to him or to myself.

Slowly, I pulled him higher, away from the edge where the water kept reaching to touch him, as if to take him back. I felt the sand give beneath my knees, the water swirling about my calves.

When we reached the hollow in the beach, half-hidden by wind-shaped grass, I eased him down into the dry. His eyes were closed again, but his breathing was steadier, as if the nearness of land alone had calmed him.

I stayed beside him, kneeling, my fingers still resting on his hand. Perhaps it was only my imagination—but I could have sworn that in the moment my skin touched his, the wind grew quieter, as if listening.

I don’t know how long I knelt there, my eyes fixed on his face, as though it might change at any moment, offer me an answer. Above us, the light began to clear—not brighter, but purer, like the glow of a pearl in its shell. The air tasted of fresh rain mingled with the warm trace that came from him.

“You don’t belong here,” I whispered, not knowing why I said it. Perhaps it was the way he lay—not like one thrown up by the waves, but like one brought to shore deliberately, almost with reverence.

I drew my cloak from my shoulders and laid it over him. Beneath the coarse wool I could feel his breath, restless, like the sea before a sudden squall. Part of me wanted to run to the village at once, to call for help, yet another part—the stronger—did not want to let him out of my sight, nor hand him to strangers.

Instead, I listened. To him. To the sea. To the strange synchrony between us, as if my heart had taken its rhythm from somewhere far beyond the horizon.

At last, when the sun had risen a little and the first voices from the harbor reached my ears, I stood. I could not leave him here. By afternoon the tide would rise again, and the beach would leave of him nothing but salt-stained traces.

With a strength that did not feel entirely my own, I pulled him to his feet. He leaned heavily against me, yet his warmth kept me upright. Step by step, I brought him up the narrow path, past rocks now glowing a dull silver, past heather that smelled of wet green.

Inside the lighthouse, I laid him on the bench by the hearth. His head fell to the side, and I saw a faint smile touch his lips—fleeting as a wave you know only by its sound.

The rest of the day I watched over him. Gave him water in small sips, wiped salt from his skin, and often paused when his breathing deepened, as though he heard something I could not.

He spoke no more—not a single word. But the silence between us was no emptiness; it was filled with something I could not name, something that soothed me and unsettled me all at once.

As dusk came, a soft blue settled over the sea, and the calls of the fishermen at the harbor faded. Lucien—I did not yet know his name, but felt it as one feels the knowledge of one's own breath—slept deeply. I stepped outside to breathe in the evening.

The air was cool, and far out across the water a light flickered. Not a fisherman's lamp, but something that moved, as if following an invisible path.

And then... there was a sound.

So faint, almost like the hum of a shell against my ear. A melody woven not from notes but from movement—from the whisper of wind, the breath of the sea, the beat of my own heart.

I stood there a long time, until I no longer knew whether I truly heard it or whether it rose from my own thoughts. But it would not let me go.

Perhaps, I thought, I would meet it again soon.
Perhaps even tonight.



Chapter 3

The Melody in the Wind



Darkness closed around me like a silent sea. No sound that did not seem born of its own heartbeat dared enter my room. Even the lighthouse breathed slower, as if afraid to wake me. I lay still, eyes open, listening to the nothingness that, on this night, was not truly empty.

At first, I thought the faint sway I heard was only the distant surf pushing through the cracks of the window. But soon I noticed something inside it—a fine thread, barely audible, yet so distinct it kept me awake. A sound that did not fade but grew.

It was not insistent, not urgent, but steady, like a distant

memory you cannot quite grasp.

A melody. It did not belong to the land.

Not to the songs the village knew, rough and steady in their simplicity. Not to the taverns where drunken fishermen tried, far too late at night, to out-sing each other. This sound was different—soft yet clear, unhurried, as though it had all the time in the world.

I held my breath so as not to lose it.

It was no invention of my mind—I knew that. For it moved something within me that lay too deep to be self-deception.

The tower was silent, my father asleep.

I sat up, pulling the thin cloth tighter around my shoulders. The wooden floor was cool beneath my bare feet, but the chill did not trouble me.

Slowly, almost shyly, I went to the door. Each step made the boards creak softly, and yet the sound seemed to crouch low, as if it, too, feared to drive the melody away.

Down the stairs. The wood was darkened by years of salt, by the breath of countless storms. I knew every scratch, every groove; I could have found my way with my eyes closed.

The lower door opened without a sound. A cool draft met me, smelling of salt, kelp—and something I could not name. Something that did not belong to this coast.

I stepped outside.

The night received me—cool, gentle, like a shawl placed around my shoulders. The sky was clear, the moon hung low, large and pale, and the stars glittered as though they had taken the salt of the sea into themselves.

And there it was again—the sound.

Now clearer. It came from the water.

I followed it, barefoot over the damp sand. My steps were

quiet, yet I felt the ground beneath me carrying the rhythm, as if it, too, were listening.

Down the dune, past wind-bent clumps of beach grass, until the view opened.

He was there. Lucien.

He was no longer the pale, injured stranger I had carried into the house that morning. He seemed... whole. As if the day had only hollowed him out in order to fill him anew in the night.

He sat on a flat stone just before the surf, and in his hands rested an instrument that shimmered in the moonlight. A lute—and yet not. Its shape seemed born of movement, not of design, as though the sea itself had grown it.

Its surface shone like mother-of-pearl, veined with fine lines that flickered silver in the light. The strings were dark, almost black, and they vibrated with a breath I could not hear, only feel.

His fingers moved across them—not hurriedly, but with a patience that made time meaningless. Each note he played sent waves across the water—not visible, but tangible, like an echo brushing against the skin.

I stood still, far enough not to disturb him, close enough to see every detail. The wind toyed with my hair, tugged at the loose ends of my shawl, yet I hardly noticed.

His head was slightly bowed, and the moonlight drew pale strokes along his cheekbones. His eyes were closed, as though he were listening not only to the music but to something behind it.

The sound seemed to change the sea. The waves no longer came unevenly but in a calm, steady rhythm. Even the wind seemed to quiet, as if listening.

I do not know how long I stood there before he opened his eyes.

He looked at me. No surprise, no hesitation—only a quiet recognition, as though he had known I would come.

He kept playing, but the melody changed. It grew warmer, softer. No longer the distant call of an unknown world, but a quiet conversation between the two of us.

I stepped forward. The sand here was cooler, damper beneath my feet.

“What is that song?” I asked, softly, almost guiltily.

He did not answer at once. His fingers glided over the strings a moment longer before coming to rest. “It is older than I am,” he said at last, “older than you. Older than this tower.”

“Where did you get it?”

A faint smile, carrying more pain than joy. “They say the sea gives you a song only once in your life. You may keep it... or give it back.”

“And if you keep it?”

He was silent. The sea breathed. “Then you carry it as the sea carries its secrets—beautiful, heavy... and never without a price.”

A cold breath touched the back of my neck. In the depths behind him, something shimmered through the water—too smooth, too deliberate to be only foam.

I stepped closer, almost without thinking. “May I?”

He did not draw the lute away, and I laid my fingertips on one of the dark strings. A note rang out—clear, bright, like glass singing in sunlight.

“Do you hear it?” he whispered.

I nodded. And I knew: he did not mean only the music.

I let my fingers rest on the string for one more heartbeat. The sound hung between us like a fine thread, too delicate to hold, yet strong enough to hold me.

Lucien watched me as though to see what the note would do inside me—not my face, not my hand, but deeper, as if he were listening to how my heart answered the music.

He began to play again, this time more slowly. Each note seemed to settle on the water like a drop, staying there without sinking. I hardly noticed when I sat down, my skirt hem in the damp sand, only an arm's length from him.

The sea before us slid smooth and calm—too calm for this season. Even the wind, which had tugged so sharply at the cliffs an hour before, had grown gentle. In the distance, the foam of a single wave gleamed in the moonlight, like a smile gone before you could be sure you had seen it.

“Have you always played it?” I asked.

“No.” He shook his head slightly. “You cannot play it until you have heard it.”

“And when did you hear it?”

His gaze drifted out over the water, as though the answer lay there. “On a night not of this world. Perhaps I was too young to understand. Or too old to still doubt.”

He spoke as if more to himself than to me. I wanted to ask what he meant, but the music allowed no words. It was like a third presence between us—awake, listening.

Once, his hand brushed my arm as he shifted the lute. The touch was hardly more than a breath, yet it made my heart stumble.

“It changes the one who hears it,” he said after a while. “Sometimes for a moment, sometimes for a lifetime.”

I did not know whether he was warning me or inviting me.

He kept playing, and I lost all sense of time. The waves moved in unison, a strange sheen lying over their surface. When the wind stirred, it sounded as though it spoke in a language only Lucien understood.

Suddenly the melody changed. It grew deeper, fuller, like a heartbeat quickening. The sea answered—not with sound, but with a movement almost too deliberate. A single wave rose, came closer, yet did not break. It held itself, as if listening too.

I could not look away—not from the wave, not from his hands, not from the eyes that now held mine again.

“Why... does it sound as though the sea is part of it?”

My voice was scarcely more than a breath.

He tilted his head. “Perhaps it is.”

I wanted to laugh, but the gravity in his expression stilled me.

The sky began to change. Thin strands of cloud drifted past, breaking the moonlight into restless strips. The night smelled more strongly of salt now, and somewhere deep in the surf was a new tone, so low it was more felt than heard.

“It’s time,” he said quietly.

“For what?”

“For you to go.”

“Why?”

He held my gaze, and I felt he had an answer he would not give me. “The wind is changing.”

The first raindrop touched my arm—cool, almost sharp. Then a second, and a third.

I did not want to stand, but the gust that followed pulled

so hard at my shawl I had to catch it. Lucien kept playing, unmoved, as though the rain belonged to a different world than he did.

I rose. The wet sand clung to my feet, and with each step it seemed the sound of the lute followed me.

At the crest of the dune, I turned once more. He sat there, his face half in shadow, half in light, his hands tireless on the strings. The sea breathed in time with his music.

By the time I reached the tower, my hair was wet with rain. But in my room, the sound was still there—not in the air now, but in me, as though he had taken a part of me and left a part of himself in its place.

Sleep came slowly, like water that hesitates before it fills everything. I dreamed of a shore I did not know, and of a sky full of stars reflected in the sea as though it had stolen them. In the distance, someone played, and the waves glowed from within.

When I awoke, the morning was quiet.
Too quiet.

I went to the window. The sky was pale, the sea smooth, and the wind held still as though listening for something.

Below, at the base of the tower, stood Adrien.
His gaze was fixed on my window—still, unmoving.
There was nothing gentle in it, only an unspoken knowing, like a wave that threatens unseen until it breaks.

I stepped back from the window, but the feeling remained, as though he still stood there, seeing through the walls.

And somewhere within me, the melody of the night still hummed—a sweetness that also felt like a promise, carrying with it the weight of danger.



Chapter 4 **Dangerous Proximity**



I drew back from the window, yet the feeling lingered—as though he still stood there, seeing through the walls. And somewhere inside me, the melody of the night still hummed—a sweetness that also felt like a promise carrying the taste of danger.

The morning was both pale and heavy, as if the night had not entirely wished to retreat. Veils of mist lay over the water like lost thoughts, and the sun was only a wan disc behind the clouds. The sea struck slower than usual, but each blow was deep, as though it came from an unfathomable depth.

I dressed slowly, still half caught in the dream I had

carried from the night—a dream of a glowing sea, and a sound that lay in my chest like a hand. The wood beneath my feet was cool, and the distant cries of gulls sounded muffled, almost reluctant.

When I opened the door to the tower, he was there.
Adrien.

His arms were crossed, his coat stirred lightly in the wind, and his gaze was fixed on me—not hard, not gentle, only so unyielding that it chilled me more than the morning air.

“You’re up early,” I said, trying to make my voice light. “Sometimes you wake and know you need to see someone.” He uncrossed his arms, took a step toward me. “Walk with me?”

I nodded, without asking where. The path chose itself: along the narrow trail skirting the dunes, up toward the cliffs—where the sea spoke loudest and the wind carried away every word.

We walked in silence side by side. Sand crunched under my shoes, and from time to time the crash of a breaking wave reached us from below. The wind came from ahead, carrying the smell of salt and kelp, and each time I drew a deep breath I thought I caught another scent in it—the breath of last night.

“You were outside,” he said at last, without looking at me.

It was not a question, yet I answered. “Yes.”

“Late.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

He glanced at me briefly, and in that look was something unspoken—something that let me guess what he thought.

“And?”

“I heard the sea.”

“Only the sea?” His voice was calm—too calm.

I said nothing. The path began to climb, and the wind grew stronger. My hair came loose from its pin, strands dancing across my face. Adrien made no move to brush them aside, but I knew he saw.

"There are nights," he said after a while, "when the sea tells you things you'd be better off not hearing."

I stopped, turned my head toward him. "And how do you know which nights those are?"

"You can tell by the faces of those who've been listening."

His gaze rested on me a heartbeat too long before he turned away and kept walking.

The cliffs were ahead now, the grass there short and rough from the wind. We climbed the last rise, and when we reached the edge, the sea lay below us like a sleeping beast—calm on the surface, yet every strike of the waves against the rock was like a muffled growl.

Adrien stepped close to the edge, letting his gaze sweep far out. "Do you see that?" he asked, pointing to a place where the water was darker.

"What?"

"There. The current. It draws in everything that gets too close."

I stepped beside him, followed his finger. "I see only waves."

"That's how it begins." He turned his head toward me, and the wind carried his voice to my ear like a breath.

"Not everything shows what it is at once."

Our eyes held. The wind grew louder, tugged at our coats, and for a moment everything else vanished—the village, the tower, even the sea. Only he and I remained, and something unspoken standing between us like an invisible wall.

“Adrien...” I began, though I did not know what I meant to say.

“I heard,” he interrupted, “that the stranger slept all day yesterday.”

I did not answer.

“And that someone was at the beach last night.”

“Rumors travel quickly,” I said quietly.

“Not all of them are rumors.” His tone was not harsh, but there was an undertone I recognized—the voice of a man who knows more than he will admit.

I wanted to look away, but his eyes held me. The wind blew stronger, carrying the taste of salt between us, and my fingers clenched into the fabric of my coat.

“If you knew what I know...” He broke off, closed his eyes briefly as though holding something back. “Be careful, Marenveil.”

His gaze was so near I could see every shadow in it, every question he would not ask.

I felt he was on the verge of saying—or doing—something more. His body leaned slightly toward mine, the space between us less than a breath. Then a sudden, fierce gust tore at us, and he stepped back.

“Come,” he said shortly. “Let’s go.”

The path back from the cliffs was the same, and yet it felt changed. The wind was more restless now, whipping at the grass, sending little spirals of sand dancing across the trail. Adrien walked close beside me, but our shoulders never touched. Perhaps on purpose.

I could feel that he still carried something unsaid, something hanging between us like a weight. But he remained silent, and that silence was louder than any words.

“Adrien,” I said at last, “what was it you were going to say

before?”

He glanced at me, then ahead again. “Sometimes it’s better not to say certain things.”

“Because they’re not true?”

“Because they are true.”

The wind stole the answer away, swallowing it before it fully reached me. Yet it echoed inside me like distant thunder, still deciding whether it would come closer.

We reached the foot of the dunes. The sea lay lower now, its roar muted, as though heard through a sheet of glass. Adrien stopped, turned toward me.

“I know you, Marenveil. I know when you’re keeping something from me.”

“And I know when you want to ask me something but won’t.”

A fleeting, almost painful smile touched his lips. “Perhaps you’re right.”

His gaze was steady, and in it lay a mixture I could not unravel—concern, mistrust, perhaps even fear. But there was something else too, something that had been there long before Lucien washed ashore.

“I just want you to remember who you are,” he said at last.

“And who is that?”

“The one who knows the sea—and knows when it lies.”

I might have laughed, had it not been for the gravity in his tone. “And if this time it’s telling the truth?”

He stepped closer. The wind carried the scent of salt and kelp between us, and for a moment I felt the distance vanish. His hand lifted slightly, as if to brush my hair back from my face, but he stopped and let it fall.

“Then,” he said softly, “it will take you entirely.”

We stood that way for a heartbeat. Only the sea still spoke, and the wind listened.

Then he turned away, and we walked on, each with our own thoughts.

The tower came into view, its gray stone against the overcast sky. At the foot of the stairs, Adrien stopped.

“I need to go to the harbor,” he said. “A new ship came in. Perhaps someone knows more...”

He broke off, as if unwilling to finish the thought.

“Adrien...”

“Take care of yourself,” he interrupted, and walked away without looking back.

I stood for a moment, listening to his footsteps until the wind swallowed them. Then I climbed the stairs, each one slower than necessary.

In my room above, it was quiet. Too quiet. I went to the window, gazed out over the sea. Where the sound had come from last night lay now only a pale sheet of gray waves. But deep inside me, something still hummed—soft, unending, like a song that will not be silenced.

I knew I would see Lucien again. Perhaps tonight. And I knew Adrien suspected it.

A gust rattled the glass, and for a moment I thought I heard a voice in it—distant, rasping, as though from an ancient throat. Madame Séraphine.

Before the day was half gone, she would summon me. And I would not be able to say no.



Chapter 5

The Whisper of the Old One



The day began with a light that fell as though through wet glass—pale, fractured, filtered by fog. I had slept little; the scraps of rest I'd managed were threaded with dreams that slipped away upon waking, like damp sand through my fingers. Only a feeling remained: a faint pressure, like an invisible finger pressing against my heart.

For a long time I stood at the window, looking out to the sea. It lay still, as if holding its breath. Only now and then came a dull strike against the rocks—deeper than usual, almost like a word from an unfamiliar throat.

Before midday I knew I was being summoned. No messenger, no knock, no voice—only something pulling

me from the tower down into the heart of the village. The houses stood close together like people shivering for warmth, their roofs slick and shining with mist. Behind them began the path to Madame Séraphine's hut.

The hut lay in a small hollow, half-sheltered by the weathered slope behind it. The roof was thatched with seaweed and ragged straw, plucked apart by gulls. In front of the door hung a curtain of shells, their clinking in the wind sounding like distant, high laughter. As I came closer, I noticed some of the shells turned against the breeze—as though studying me.

I hesitated, then pushed the curtain aside. The clinking deepened, almost became melodic. Inside, it smelled of salt, damp wood, and something bitter—perhaps dried herbs, perhaps something that never quite faded. The room was small but crowded with things: nets with amber drops caught in them like trapped sunlight; jars that gurgled softly though their lids were tight; bowls of shells that gleamed dully in the candlelight.

In the center sat Madame Séraphine on a low stool. Her eyes were gray like a sky before a storm, and they rested on me as if she had been watching me stand there for hours.

“Child of Light,” she said. Her voice was rasping, but not weak—more like the tone of an old instrument that only gives its full sound in practiced hands.

“You called me?” I asked, though I knew it hadn't been a call in words.

A barely visible smile crossed her face. “The wind called you. I showed it the way.”

She beckoned me closer, and I stepped carefully over the uneven floor. Something crunched under my feet—dried seaweed, brittle as paper. Séraphine gestured to a stool beside her.

The moment I sat, the sound of the shells outside changed—slower, heavier. She reached into a bowl before her, filled with shells, stones, and fine strands of seaweed. Her fingers searched within, and each shell she lifted gave a note: low and resonant, or clear like a drop on metal.

“The sea speaks to those who listen,” she murmured.
“But not always in words.”

She placed a shell in my hand. It was smooth, cool, and as I held it something in me responded—a faint pull somewhere deep beneath my skin.

“Listen,” she said.

I lifted the shell to my ear. No familiar roar, no wave-sound—only a whisper, too soft to understand, and yet unmistakably words. I lowered it and looked at Séraphine. “It wants to tell you what is coming,” she explained. “But in a language only the heart understands.”

She placed more shells on the floor, arranging them in a circle around our feet. The candle flames leaned, as though something were drawing them. Séraphine’s gray eyes gleamed as she leaned closer.

“The Storm-Heart has awakened.”

I felt my pulse quicken. “What is that?”

“A gift. A curse.” She let the words fall like two stones into water. “It brings you what you most desire—and takes what you most fear to lose.”

Some shells quivered faintly. A sound rose, barely audible, like the hum of a string within wood. “You’ve already met it, though you don’t yet know.”

“Met who?”

“The sea, when it has eyes.”

I said nothing. Outside, the wind was growing stronger; the shells in the doorway rattled more fiercely. “Child of Light,” she said, “you will stand between breath and

depth. And if you fall, the sea will not give you back.”

“The sea does not speak of yesterday,” she went on. “It speaks of return. Song, gaze, touch, loss—the sea knows no beginning, only the circle.”

She let a large shell slide into the center of the circle; a fine tone filled the room, and the seaweed at our feet stirred. “The Storm-Heart is where the desire of the sea and the desire of man recognize each other.”

“Can one escape it?”

“You can close your eyes. But the sea will still find the taste of your dreams.”

Wind pressed through the cracks. A smell of damp ash mingled with the salt-heavy air. “I don’t know what you mean,” I whispered—and thought of Lucien’s song, lying in me like an unseen thread.

“You do know,” she replied softly. She tied a bundle of dried elecampane and sea fennel, held it over a candle until pale, bitter smoke rose. Then she traced a salt-sign on my forehead with wet fingers. “For clear sight—and for shadows best left blurred.”

I had to close my eyes. When I opened them, the room was the same and yet altered—sharper at the edges, softer at the center.

“Look into the water,” she said.

I bent forward. Beneath the surface, something moved—a hand, marked by salt, with scars fine as threads. My throat went dry.

“No,” I whispered.

“Don’t say no. Say true.”

“What is the price?”

“Always something. A name, a memory, sometimes the place you call home. If you don’t pay now, you pay later.”

Cold spread through me, as if someone had drawn all the warmth away. “I want no curse.”

“Curses are only the shadows of wishes. None fall where there has never been light.”

She handed me a smooth hagstone. “An eye that needs no lid. Wear it when the wind gathers.”

Then she gave me a strand of seaweed with a silvery lock of hair woven in. “For the moment you think you are alone.”

“Why do you call me Child of Light?”

“Because you carry light that is not from the sun. And because it hungers.”

An image rose in me: black water, a shape within it, then cliffs from a bird’s-eye view. Beside me a dark figure, questioning without a mouth.

“You will be asked—and you will answer, even in silence.”

From outside came three knocks, muffled, as if from an unseen hand. “The wind brings you the rest. Time to go.” She placed her hand in mine, invisible in weight yet heavy. “What you seek is already seeking you. The sea is not your enemy—it is your mirror.”

I stepped out. The air was damp, a misting rain like a veil of salt. On the path back to the village, I felt I was not walking alone—more as though an echo kept pace beside me.

Adrien was waiting at the foot of the dune. “You were with the old one.”

“She told me things.”

“In riddles, I suppose.”

“Sometimes the straight path is not the one you need to see.”

“Sometimes it’s the only one that saves you.”

We walked toward the cliffs. The hagstone in my pocket scraped against the fabric, the seaweed cord lay warm in

my fist.

“What are you carrying?”

“A stone.”

“From her?”

“From the sea.”

“One rarely gives something back without losing.”

At the top, we looked down at the harbor. “Have you ever thought of leaving?”

“Every day.”

“And yet there are things that exist only here. Like truth.”

His gaze lingered on my forehead. “She calls you Child of Light, doesn’t she?”

A pebble dropped into the sea without a splash. “She warned you of things I couldn’t see.”

“This is not a fight against the wind—it’s a fight against what you hear in it.”

“And what do you hear?”

“A melody.”

“I know.”

At the harbor, a man spoke of still water near the west cliff that sang—not like humans, not like whales, but like a rope that breaks and yet cannot break.

Adrien led me to a place on the pier. “Listen.”

A faint pull thrummed in the wood—barely a rhythm, only a wanting.

“Don’t go to the beach tonight.”

“And if the song calls me?”

“Then come to me first.”

Later he said, “If you go, take something of your own.”

“I carry the tower.”

“The tower carries you.”

When I returned to the tower, I set down the stone and the seaweed cord. The salt-mark on my forehead felt

tight, like glass. Child of Light, I heard Séraphine—no comfort, but a charge.

That night, something sang on the shore, without a mouth. I opened the window, breathed in metal and algae. You cannot unhear.

I put on my coat, left the stone behind—you do not bind what you must unbind tonight.

At the foot of the dune stood Adrien. His gaze struck me like surf—not loud, but relentless.

Before the night fully fell, his questions would find words. And my answers would no longer keep silent.



Chapter 6 **Eyes Like Surf**



Adrien waited at the foot of the dune, his coat darker than the sky. The wind had lost some of its edge, but none of its opinion. When she drew closer, his gaze shifted only by the space of a breath—from her face outward, to the line where the sea began. A man weighing whether what he had to fear came from out there—or from her.

“You’re late,” he said.

“Later than the wind.” She wanted it to sound light. It didn’t.

They walked side by side down the path, the sand damp as if it meant to know where they were planning to go. A

gray stillness hung over the harbor; the light lay flat across the roofs, and the last voices from the shipyard were losing their color. The net-shanks hanging from the piles looked like wet hands.

“What did the old one say?” he asked, as if they’d been silent for a long time already.

“What she always says—in half-sentences that fill an entire day.”

“And you? Do you fill them too?”

She could have said: It was nothing. Instead her eyes stayed fixed on the surface of the water, where the line to the horizon wasn’t a line at all but only a suggestion. She felt her body lean that way, like a compass lodged inside her.

“I’m tired, and my head is playing tricks.”

“Your head rarely plays without your heart paying.” He stopped walking, just to hold the sentence in place. “I don’t want you to pay.”

A fishing boat came slowly into the harbor, its engine noise blunt as an old cough. The silhouette was unfamiliar, the motion familiar: cautious, steady, as if it carried people who didn’t wish to disturb the way home. “Come to the yard tomorrow. There are planks that could use a second hand.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe is a weak promise.”

“Maybe is honest.”

“Honesty can be courage—but not always.” His gaze followed the boat as it docked. Men stood on the deck, narrow figures rinsed clean by rain. One leapt ashore, caught a rope, tossed it on—his movement clean as a cut. Adrien knew what she wanted to see. And what she didn’t want to show.

She walked beside him, and when she was silent, it wasn’t the old, familiar silence that saves a question for later.

This silence was a door that hadn't stuck—it had already closed.

"The summer market's the day after tomorrow. The East Pier kids want a tug-of-war with the West Pier."

"They'll lose. The West Pier kids save their hunger for things like that."

He stored away every word. A boy from the piling yard ran past, glanced at her, and pretended he hadn't.

"Come to the end of the pier. The wood is quiet today."

They laid their hands on the planks. The wood was only wood. For one shaming moment, he felt relieved.

"Sometimes I wish I could only hear what's there."

"And you hear what isn't?"

"I hear where things want to go."

"And where do you want to go?"

She didn't answer. The water pinched the pier at the edge the way cats test a cushion.

They stayed until the cold from the planks rose into them. Behind them, someone called for a knife; farther down, something heavy slapped into a barrel. Sounds that knew their measure. Since when had she forgotten the measure?

"I'm going home. It's warm in the tower."

"I'll walk you part of the way."

"Not tonight."

He left it as it was, like a boat that can't be secured any other way. "Then until tomorrow."

"Until tomorrow."

On her way back she turned. Adrien still stood at the pier, hands on his hips, looking out. A man made of rope and wood—and more than that.

The next morning the harbor smelled of tar and cold iron. The gulls kept their distance, as if the air were

heavier than usual. Adrien stood on the middle dock, a coil of rope over his shoulder, watching her walk along the pier. Her coat was open, the wind reaching inside, and something in her step betrayed that she hadn't come to stay long.

"I thought you were coming to help."

"I came to see how you are."

"Me? I'm here. And you?"

She didn't meet his eyes, searching instead for a point behind him, where the water broke into small, shattered images. "I'm here."

"You can be here and still be somewhere else."

"You can ask and still not want to know."

He kept knotting the rope, as if his life depended on it. "I want to know."

She stepped closer, touched the wooden railing. Her fingers traced the rough edge, and he knew she knew the grain like a map that wasn't hers.

"You were by the sea for a long time yesterday."

"I was where the wind was."

"And today?"

"Today I'm where you are."

He wanted to be glad. But gladness didn't come into the harbor when the sky looked like this. "Stay a while. Help me."

She took the rope-end from his hands. Her movements were sure, like before, when she often stood here. But after a few knots, she dropped the rope as if it had bitten her.

"I have to go to the market. There's cloth I want to look at."

"Cloth?"

"For a dress."

"For the summer market?"

“Maybe.”

He nodded, but the nod wasn’t agreement—just buying time. She left, and he watched her until she disappeared behind a stack of crates.

Later, walking back along the pier, he met her again. She carried no cloth. Only the same look as before—as if she saw something he could not.

“Found nothing?”

“Nothing that stayed.”

A boat was coming in farther out, and Adrien noticed how her head tilted slightly, testing the wind.

“You hear something?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe is honest,” he said, and the words tasted of yesterday.

That evening he sat on the bollard outside his hut. From a distance he could see the tower, light behind a narrow window. She was up there, her gaze turned outward, not down. Not toward him.

The day before the summer market brought more life to the harbor than usual. Traders unloaded crates, children balanced on ropes, women laughed loud to be heard over the wind. Adrien worked on a plank whose edges the salt had eaten away.

She came around midday, without warning. “I wanted to see how it looks.”

“The harbor? Or the market?”

“Both.”

“The harbor is as it always is. The market—not yet.”

She stood still, and he noticed she wasn’t really looking at the crates or the stalls. Her gaze hung above the masts, where the air was brighter.

“You’re waiting for something.”

“Maybe for nothing.”

“Maybe is...”—he stopped. The sentence had already been spoken.

He wiped his hands on a rag. “Stay in Marenveil tonight. There’s music at the East Pier.”

“I hear music every day.”

“Not this kind.”

“And if the wind carries me elsewhere?”

“Then I’ll go with you.”

She smiled, but not because he’d said it.

Later, on his way back from the East Pier, he saw her again. She stood alone at the pier’s edge, her coat whipping in the wind, and the sky had that color that promised nothing good.

“You should be indoors.”

“And you?”

“I’m here because you’re here.”

She turned away. “Sometimes that’s not enough.”

He felt the weight in his chest deepen. No storm came so suddenly as this.

As the sun went down, traders carried the last goods from the pier. Adrien stayed until she was gone. Only the smell of salt remained—and the thought that he could not hold her if she didn’t want to be held.

He looked out, and something moved on the horizon. A sail, small and far too distant. He blinked—and it was gone. Maybe just a wave, maybe not.

Marenveil slept early that night, but in one window of the tower, a light burned for a long time. Adrien sat in his hut, listening to the wood crack, and knew tomorrow would be a different day.

Morning came with a sky clear over the village, as if the night had taken nothing with it. Voices and laughter

carried from afar; the summer market was like a breath after days grown heavy. The stalls crowded the square, lengths of cloth fluttered, the smell of fried fish and sugared pastries mingled with the scent of fresh-cut wood.

Through the booths moved a familiar shadow, and somewhere in the crowd she would soon be—perhaps with a hand on a roll of cloth, perhaps already in the rain that was gathering on the horizon.



Chapter 7 **A Dance in the Rain**



The summer market had changed the village. Even from the pier you could see the colors hanging like banners between the houses, as if, for a single day, Marenveil were no longer the closed-off harbor town it had always been, but a city celebrating itself. The narrow lanes seemed wider, as though the stalls had pushed the houses apart. Above them, lengths of cloth in red, blue, and gold fluttered in the wind, swelling again and again as if the air meant to snatch them from the sky.

I stepped into the first row of stalls and let myself be carried by the river of people. The scent of fried fish mingled with the sweetness of honey pastries and the sharp, almost biting note of freshly cut herbs. Voices lay

layered over one another like bright fabrics, folding into and out of each other, laughter coming and going, while somewhere by the fountain a lute-player tried to outplay the roar of the crowd.

At one stall, jars of preserved fruit gleamed in the sunlight—yellow pears, red cherries, dark plums whose syrup clung to the glass like liquid gold. A girl with a white headscarf offered me a sample on a wooden stick, but I declined. I didn't want to carry anything in my hands. I wanted them free.

Children ran laughing between the legs of the grown-ups; a dog barked and strained against its leash while a merchant loudly bargained down the price of fresh eel. I moved on, drawn to a row of fabrics whose colors seemed almost too vivid for the dim sky.

Between two stalls, I stopped abruptly. There, at the edge of a fabric stand, stood Lucien. His gaze was fixed on a deep green cloth draped over the corner of a wooden frame, as if he were weighing not just its color, but its weight and the story woven into it. The sunlight struck his hair at an angle, lighting scattered strands, and the wind teased one stubborn lock down across his forehead.

I stood too long. Long enough for my heart to stumble when he lifted his head and looked straight at me. The people around us moved on as if we no longer belonged to them. His gaze struck like a wave that didn't break, but drew itself inward until it carried everything in me away with it. He didn't smile, yet there was something in his eyes that held me there.

"Market spoils?" he asked as I stepped closer.

"Not yet."

"Then you came to look."

"Perhaps."

We walked side by side, with no destination. The sounds

around us faded—not because the market grew quieter, but because I no longer heard the other voices. Only our footsteps remained, and the faint sounds of his movement beside me—the rasp of fabric, the creak of boot soles over uneven stones.

At the fountain, we stopped. Children splashed in water that glinted in the sun as if someone had thrown silver shards into it. A drop leapt over the rim and struck the back of my hand—cool, but with a strange tingling, as though it carried a spark.

“Rain,” Lucien said, lifting his gaze to the sky.

It was still blue, but something waited behind it.

He raised a hand as if to catch the first drop before it fell. Then it came—not shyly, but in swift, dense points that darkened the cloth above the stalls almost at once.

Merchants called out, laughing as they dragged canvas over their goods. People crowded under awnings.

I stepped forward to seek cover too, but his hand stopped me—warm, steady, unhurried. “Stay.”

The rain settled over the square like a second skin. It drummed on wood, fabric, and flesh, streamed over my temples and down my neck. My hair grew heavy, yet it wasn’t an unpleasant weight. He stood close before me, and for a moment there was only the steady roar that shut out everything else.

“You do dance, don’t you?”

“Not here.”

“Here, especially.”

His hand closed around mine, and before I could speak, he turned me. The movement was light, fluid, as if he had merely suggested a direction and my body had known the rest on its own. My hand rested in his; the other found his shoulder. The rain became a curtain

enclosing us.

I laughed—softly at first, then brighter—as the rain struck my face. My dress clung to my knees, the fabric heavy and yet alive. His hand at my waist grew firmer, as though to guard me from the wind, or from the moment itself.

The rain painted patterns on his lashes, like tiny crystals placed there by hand. Droplets slid over his temples, vanishing into the collar of his shirt. My breathing changed—deeper, but uneven, as if each step rewrote my rhythm.

We moved between the stalls; people stepped aside or paused to watch, then moved on. Some smiled. Others looked as though they had recognized something familiar in us, something they themselves had not felt in a long time.

Under a nearby awning, the lute-player kept playing. The rain softened the sound, but each note seemed to multiply in the water, as if it belonged to us. The melody was nothing triumphant—it was soft, almost searching, and it filled the space between our steps.

“You can’t run when you’re dancing,” he said close to my ear.

“Who’s running?”

“Your eyes.”

I meant to answer, but he turned me again, and the market blurred. Everywhere, droplets glimmered on his hair, his skin, his lips. Each that touched my skin burned itself in, as if it were more than water.

His hand at my waist seemed to know exactly how close it could be without taking too much—or perhaps it knew exactly how much I would give without hesitation. The wet between us made every touch softer, smoother, as

though we were not two bodies, but currents flowing into one another.

I felt the rhythm of his steps, the ease with which he guided me, and yet there was something unpredictable—sudden turns, small, almost teasing moves where he let me go for a breath only to catch me again at once.

Rain slid over my lips, tasting faintly of salt, as though it had touched the sea. Lucien looked at me as if he could guess the taste.

“Never danced like this before?” he asked.

“Not like this.”

His smile flickered briefly, but it was enough to change the moment. He drew me so that my back rested against his chest for a heartbeat. His hand stayed at my waist, warm despite the water, and I felt the calm strength of his arm, the steady rhythm of his breath against my spine.

A few children ran shrieking between us, barefoot, their hair flying like wet pennants. We stopped to watch them. I could have laughed, but Lucien’s thumb brushed absently over the fabric of my dress—a small, almost innocent motion that struck through me like lightning.

“The lute-player’s speeding up,” he murmured, and indeed—the melody quickened, almost daring us. Lucien matched it, leading me into steps I didn’t know, yet felt as though I’d always known.

The world was only drops, skin, breath, and that gaze that held me. I knew people were watching us, but it was as if we stood in a circle no one else could enter.

“One more round?” he asked, though it didn’t sound like a question.

I nodded, and we turned again and again, until my hair flew like a dark crown around us, only for the rain to lay it heavy on my shoulders once more.

The rain didn't let up. It was no fleeting summer shower, but had the persistence of a moment unwilling to end. We stood still, our hands still linked, as the roar swallowed everything else.

I felt the warmth of his fingers through the wet, the slight tremor that didn't come from the weather. Near him, the cold seemed different—it didn't slide between us, but wrapped around us both like a blanket.

Lucien looked at me for a long time. Not a gaze that demanded possession. It was as though he were reading something in me, as if he'd found a line between the raindrops meant only for him.

"They say rain puts out fire," I said, if only to break the quiet current between us.

"Only if it burns weakly."

He said it as if he knew exactly how strong the flame was. His thumb moved slowly over the back of my hand, and a single drop fell from his hair onto my skin—cold, and yet with a heat that came from inside me.

"You should get under cover," he said without moving.

"And you?"

"I'll stay until the rain knows it's time to go."

I stepped back—only once. He released my hand as though giving up the last thing holding him there. The market was filling again; merchants called out prices, voices returned, children ran laughing through puddles. Yet something still hung between us, denser than the air, heavier than the wet around us.

I turned to leave, but heard his voice then, low, almost more to the rain than to me:

"There are songs that can only be played in weather like this."

I paused, wanting to ask what he meant. But he gave me

only a narrow, guarded expression—almost a smile—before turning away.

I walked through the lanes, my dress dripping, my steps heavy. Every drop falling from the awnings sounded like a separate word sinking into the stones. I didn't know if it was the rain or something else that had unsettled me so completely.

Life was gathering again between the stalls. A woman called after me, offering a slice of warm fried apple cake. I refused, only shook my head, and kept walking. The scent of cinnamon followed me like a hand trying to draw me back.

As I left the square, a gust brought with it the smell of salt—sharper than usual, as though the sea had decided to come closer tonight.

The streets emptied slowly. Only a few lanterns burned, their light warped through raindrops that clung to the glass like small moons.

And then, very faintly, I heard it.
A melody.

So soft it might have been a mistake. It didn't come from a nearby street, nor from a house or tavern. It floated from far away, as though the wind were carrying it to me over the water. Each note was clear, unbroken, as if it rose straight from the heart of a wave.

I stopped, standing in the middle of the wet stones. My heart beat unevenly, as if it had recognized something before my mind could.

I didn't know how, or why—but I knew with certainty:
This song was for me.
And it meant more than I could yet understand.



Chapter 8 **The Forbidden Melody**



The rain had eased by the time I left the square. The cobblestones glistened, and in the puddles the market stalls lay like shattered moons. From the awnings, water dripped in long, even intervals, as if the day had settled into a calmer breath. The air tasted of sugar and salt, of cinnamon and damp wood. Behind me, the voices of the summer market thinned, fading to the shuffling of a few solitary footsteps and the small-boned patter of drops falling from eaves into buckets.

Then came the melody.

At first it was a mistake—a thin, bright thread lifted by the wind and let fall again. I stopped. Between two stalls I saw the dune, darker than the sky, and beyond it the bare

line where the sea began. When the melody returned, it was clearer, freer, as though it could only come from a place with no walls. I followed it, without haste and without resistance, the way one follows a scent that speaks to memories older than oneself.

The lanes narrowed and grew quieter, the windows darker. Somewhere a door slammed shut, as though a house were protesting the curfew. I turned into the path that wound between the rocks to the old chapel. Beneath me the sea worked, calm yet awake. The rain had left its marks: glittering runnels on the stones, puddles edged like soft knives. The wind smelled of kelp; when it brushed across my forehead, my skin cooled, as though something invisible lay upon it—something I did not want to brush away.

The melody led me like a light unseen. I knew the way: it bent where the slope gave way, then ran in a straight, stony vein toward the chapel, perched close to the drop. The building was small, little more than a single room, with a round window above the altar and a door that never fully shut. Large, pale flakes of plaster had fallen from the walls; when the sun was low, they shimmered like fish scales. Tonight, the door stood ajar.

The sound came from within.

I set my hand to the wood. It was cold and rough; the rain had softened the grain as if it had drunk salt for years. I pushed the door open.

The chapel smelled of cold stone and a memory of smoke. Moonlight fell through the round window, laying a silver disk on the floor; within it stood Lucien. He held the lute as one might hold something that would break if not taken seriously. His fingers moved across the strings, and each time a note swelled, it did not spread but deepened, as though it were boring a path into the dark. He did not notice me at once. His gaze clung to the lute, yet he seemed far away—so far that the moonlight caught in his eyes like in water. The song was neither happy nor

sad; it was both at once, like the feeling of hearing a name you bear only in dreams. The drops falling through a crack in the roof seemed to fall in time with it. I stayed in the doorway, and the wood yielded faintly beneath my weight, as though it had expected me to stand just so. He looked up. The song did not stop, but its sound grew narrower, as if it had to slip through something for a breath. Then he laid his palm flat across the strings, and the chapel became stone again.

"You came," he said. It did not sound like surprise.

"I heard you."

He made a small movement, not a nod yet still assent, and set the lute on the bench beside him, as though entrusting it to someone I could not see. "Not every road here is easy," he said evenly. "And yet one takes it, when one must."

"I didn't have to," I replied, though it did not sound entirely true. I stepped inside. The floor was cold through the thin soles of my shoes, but it was a friendly cold, one that promised order.

"Sit," he said. He gestured to the bench opposite, at the edge of the moonlight. When I sat, I felt the dampness of the wood seep through my dress. Lucien remained standing, only a step away, as though the shadow of his body held him up.

"That wasn't the song from the market."

"No." His voice was quieter now, and in its quiet lay a choice. "The market has songs that draw people closer to one another. This... draws something else closer."

"What?"

He did not answer at once. In the round window, a cloud crept over the moon; the light dimmed, the disk on the floor tightened, as though pointing to something not yet present. Lucien lifted the lute, sat across from me, and the moment the strings brushed his arm, the air changed. No sound, only a feeling of density, as though the room had been emptied and refilled.

“Listen,” he said. He did not play; his fingers only ghosted over the strings without sound. My skin answered anyway, with a shiver that crept from my wrist to my throat.

“It’s old,” he went on. “Too old to be ours. And yet we are the ones who carry it.”

“Why us?”

“Because we live close enough to hear when something out there calls.”

He did not smile. “And because some of us answer.”

The candle on the altar flickered. There was no wind. It was as if someone had spoken past its wick. I wanted to ask what he had heard, back then, when he first answered—but I did not. Instead, I laid my hand on the bench between us and left my fingers there, as if I wanted to listen to the wood.

He lowered his gaze, as though he had expected the gesture. Then he lifted it again and waited until I looked at him. “It’s time,” he said. “If you want.”

The sentence had no second half. Still, I heard it. I nodded.

He began to play. Not loudly; the notes did not go out to the walls to come back again. They stayed between us, resting on the bench, on the fingers with which I touched the wood, and on the place beneath my breastbone where you know if a day has been true. The song had no verses, no refrain; it did not repeat, yet much returned—like shores you pass, ones you have seen before but do not recognise because the direction is different.

I closed my eyes. Someone could have screamed and I would not have heard. Every string was a road that did not end when it began. Somewhere in the room water dripped, and the drops were beats no one counted. When I opened my eyes again, Lucien was closer. His knees almost touched mine; I would only have had to reach out my hand to feel the tone against his skin.

"You called me here," I said, not knowing whether it was true.

"Not I," he answered. "But I knew you would come." The cloud left the moon; the disk of light lay wide again on the floor. In it, dust moved like tiny living things. I thought perhaps they made words I could not read. And then there was only the music, and the chapel was no longer small.

Lucien set the lute aside slowly, as though he had given the room something that could now stand on its own. The notes still hung in the air, invisible threads on which something could be drawn up, if one had the fingers for it. He sat close beside me; our shoulders did not touch, but the warmth of his body pushed the cold of the bench back.

"They say," he began, his voice so low it was almost another note of the song, "this song is older than any story we know. Older than this stone, older than the names we give our children. They say it is not a song at all, but an oath that sounds like a song so we can keep it." I looked at him. The nearness made it hard to see him whole; his face was too close to take in as an image. Instead I saw fragments: the fine shadow under his cheek where the moonlight did not reach; the dampness at his hairline; the small, pale scar on his left hand I had never noticed before.

"And you bear this oath," I said.

"No," he said, and the candle on the altar twitched as though someone had shared the sound of his denial with its flame. "It bears me."

"How?"

He took a second. "Imagine a line that is not drawn. A thread you cannot see, but which pulls when it must. It lies in the air and the skin and in everything between. If you walk the way it wants, you notice nothing. If you walk against it—" He paused. "Then everything around you begins to wonder: water that should be calm rises;

wind stands still; candles listen; people say your name when they mean another.”

“And if you resist?”

“Then it grows louder. Not in the ears. In what lies behind them.”

I breathed in. The leather of my boots creaked. Outside, a higher wave struck; the sound crawled over the stone as though it were heavier than before.

“Who swore the oath?”

“Not I,” he said again, with a patience that soothed him more than me. “The first of us. Or those before them. Not even the elders in their stories know how many. It was in a time when the sea was not only a border, but... judge. And benefactor. And hunger.”

“Why did they swear it?”

“Because what feeds you must be given something in return. They wanted their sons and daughters to live. For the harbour to have boats that returned. For storms to pass when they saw too much.” He closed his eyes briefly, and his lids cast narrow, leaf-like shadows on his cheeks.

“They swore to keep the song. Not loud, not for markets, not for dancing. Only for times when the sea comes too near without calling someone to answer. Then you play. Or you keep silent.”

“And you?”

“I...” He searched for a word and found none that betrayed him. “I was born when the women still knew where to lay the child so it would hear the right thing. I was old enough to take it on, young enough not to ask why. The song holds. Until someone comes who can bear it better. Or until—” He broke off. His hand lay on the bench, only a finger’s breadth from mine. He did not pull it away.

“Until what?”

“Until the sea claims its share.”

The candle flickered. The air seemed at once denser and softer. In the round window, the moon stood with a

sharper edge. I looked at Lucien's hand, and the candlelight made the small scar shine silver. I set my fingers beside his without touching. The closeness created a warmth that did not come from skin.

"You could have kept silent," I said. "You didn't have to tell me this."

He looked at me. "I kept silent. Longer than was good for me."

"And now?"

"Now there's someone who can listen without asking whether what they hear is wise."

I let the breath out slowly. The bench no longer creaked; perhaps it had decided to carry us. "Why me?"

He did not smile. Or perhaps he did—a change of thought in his face so slight it was almost nothing.

"Because you stayed in the rain when others ran."

"That's a poor reason."

"It's a true one."

The silence between us was not amused. It was attentive, waiting for the moment when one of our words would set in motion something that could not be undone. I heard my heartbeat. Not in my ears. In what lies behind them.

"When you play," I said, "the sea listens."

"It always listens. I only decide whether I answer."

"And tonight?"

His eyes darkened, though the light did not change.

"Tonight I called."

"Whom?"

"Not whom," he said, so softly I felt the answer on my skin more than in my ear. "What."

In that instant, it was as if the chapel took a second breath. The candle shivered without shrinking, and the drops from the roof crack paused for the space of a beat, as if listening. I heard nothing but the surf behind the rocks—and beneath it something that was not a sound, but an acknowledgment.

"You must not break the oath," I said, without knowing why I chose "must not" instead of "cannot."

"No."

"But you may speak."

He nodded, and this time it was a nod that truly pointed toward the world. "I may speak. And sometimes I may show." His hand left the bench and slid, hesitant as though over a boundary he did not know, toward my knuckles. He did not touch me. Yet the nearness was more certain than any pressure.

"Show me," I said, before I knew what I meant.

He picked up the lute again. The candle now burned steadily, as if it understood that what was coming would not waver. Lucien did not strike the strings; he stroked them, so quietly I guessed the tone rather than heard it. The room answered—not with echo, but with acceptance. I felt the seat of the bench beneath me as if it had changed: the wood alive, just enough to bear weight without being heavy.

The song was not a song. It was a threading. Something went into me and out again, leaving no mark yet letting me know where it had been. Images came, none to be held: light shimmering under water without breaking; a hand brushing the surface without dividing it; a stone falling slowly, as if wishing to earn its fall.

I laid my hand on his forearm. The skin was warm, the tendons taut beneath. He did not glance at my hand, as though he had expected it there. When the last tones faded, the room stayed open, as if a door had been unlatched that belonged to no wall.

"Now you know," he said.

"I know something," I replied, my voice rough as though I had been silent too long. "Whether it's that, I don't know."

"It's enough."

"For whom?"

"For us."

His arm was still beneath my hand. I did not lower my fingers. "And for the sea?"

"The sea does not withdraw because we understand something," he said calmly. "It withdraws when it gets what it demands."

"What does it demand?"

"Sometimes only to be seen. Sometimes more. Sometimes—" He turned his head slightly and looked toward the door, ajar. "Sometimes it wants someone to come."

"Who?"

"Not who." This time he smiled, and I did not understand the smile. "What."

The candle burned upright. No wind moved. Yet it felt as though something unseen brushed past me, laying a trail of cold along my neck that warmed at once. I did not turn. I knew there was nothing behind me that could be seen. I knew there was something behind me that did not need to be.

"I'm afraid," I said, and only when I spoke it did I realise the fear was not of him.

"I'm not," he replied. "Not while you're here."

I let go of his skin and drew my hand back slowly, as if releasing a string that would snap if freed too quickly. For a few heartbeats my fingers still felt as though they carried something that was not mine. Then it was gone. Or remained in another way.

"Tell me all of it," I said. "Not in images. Not in half-sentences."

Lucien set the lute on the bench beside him and turned fully to me. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, hands clasped. The posture made him look younger, as though he were someone feeling his way toward a question he could not ask alone.

"I am the bearer of a song," he said. "And the song is an oath. Whoever bears it does not entirely belong to themselves. They belong to an edge. Not land. Not sea."

The in-between. It is a contract: We sing when called. We stay silent when the land wants us. We return if the call is not for us. We go if it is. None of us breaks it, for whoever does loses more than they meant to keep.”

“Who told you this?”

“My mother didn’t tell me—she showed me. Not with words. With what she didn’t do. She didn’t sing when the wind came. She didn’t go when the night called. She stayed. So I had to go, when I was old enough to know where.”

“You don’t want this oath.”

“Wanting isn’t the question. I am a part already decided.”

“And if you don’t answer?”

He lifted his hands, as if to frame something invisible.

“Then the sea answers alone. And that is worse.”

I thought of the rain at the market, of the drops like sparks on my skin. I thought of the moment his hand had found my waist without taking what it was not allowed. I thought of Adrien, who had said stay, and of the part of me that had known the word before I heard it.

“There are people,” I said softly, “who never understood why you never wholly belonged to them.”

“I never asked them to understand.”

“And me?”

“I ask you to listen.”

He shifted closer, so close I could see the fine salt crystals on his collar, left there by the walk here. “If you stay, the song is lighter. If you go, it is heavier. That’s all I know.”

“I don’t know what I can do.”

“Then find out, without hurrying.”

We were silent. The sea was not. It did not speak louder; it only spoke more clearly, as though something had settled in its throat. The candle remained still. The drops in the roof crack fell regularly again, every third one hitting the same place on the stone so persistently you

could believe a hollow would form there.

"Come," he said after a while, and the word meant no farewell. "I want to show you something."

We rose. The chapel had grown smaller now that we were moving. I followed him to the altar, made of rough stone, cracked like old skin. Behind it a narrow door led to a low passage and a stair down the outer wall to the rock plateau.

"I bring no one here," he said without sounding solemn.

"Not because it's sacred, but because it's... right not to."

We stepped outside. The stair was damp, the stone slick, and he went ahead carefully without reaching for my hand. I set my feet in the hollows worn by others before us and held to the cold rock. The plateau lay like a tongue above the water. Here the spray was only breath; the waves broke further out, as if to leave us this small stage.

"Listen," he said.

I listened. At first the usual: the rhythm of the waves, the distant cry of a gull unable to sleep. Then something separated from it—a deep, steady pull, as though someone were stirring the night with a great spoon. Not a tone, more a pattern within the tones. I stepped closer to him. He stood firm, as though rooted into the rock.

"When I play," he said, "this answers. Not always. Not in every weather. But tonight it does."

"And if you don't play?"

"It answers anyway. Only differently."

I did not know whether my dizziness came from the depth without a rim below us, or from the fact that what I heard touched something in me I had last felt as a child, standing with eyes closed on the shore, asking the sea to give me a name. I laid my hand to the rock to see if it was warm. It was, though the wind was cool.

"You called me here," I repeated, and this time it sounded more like knowledge than a question.

"I called the song," he said. "It chose you."

"And if I refuse?"

He turned his head, looked at me. "Refusal is for things you already possess. This—" He made a small gesture that meant everything between us and the line of the water. "—you can only accept, or pass by as if you never saw it."

"And you?"

"I accept. I never pass it by. That is my part."

I stepped closer still. Our shoulders touched, and the warmth was so clear it made the wind forget itself. "I don't know what I do if I accept," I said.

"No one knows before they do."

The waves scooped dark silver; each crest broke without sending spray to our feet. In the cracks of the plateau water gathered, breathing more softly than the sea, yet in the same rhythm. Above us hung the moon, its edge nicked as though someone had taken a sample with a knife.

"I've been told," Lucien went on, "that the oath must not be broken. Not because punishment follows, but because something greater than any one of us would come apart. The elders say we are only knots in a net. Untie one knot, the net still holds. Forget how to tie, and it will not hold for long."

"And you're the way of tying?"

"No. I'm just a hand that knows it."

I set my fingers into his. He closed them, as though the gesture were a return. No jolt went through me, no vision, no flash—only a calm settling of skin on skin, like a book placed exactly into the space left for it on a shelf.

"When we meet again," he said, "it won't be here. Not under a roof. Not where walls listen. There's a cove that's on no map. You know the old path behind the dunes? Where the thistles tear your trousers? Past the third hill the sand drops more steeply. If you go at night, you'll see on the left a patch where the beach grass is darker. There a narrow descent begins. At the bottom is the cove. It belongs to no one."

"Does it have a name?"

"Only on nights when you don't say it aloud."

"And why there?"

"Because the song there sounds less like a command. And more like what it is."

"What is it?"

"A bridge." His hand in mine grew firmer. "Between what we know and what we miss."

The wind dropped, abruptly. For a few heartbeats I heard the water as if it stood still. Then a deep breath from out beyond came in, one that didn't break against the rock but moved on beneath it. The candle in the chapel we could no longer see must have flickered then; I was sure, though I could not see it.

"When?" I asked.

"Between ebb and tide," he said. "Tomorrow, before the day has been chosen. The night is ours. The edge belongs to the sea. We meet in the middle."

I could have laughed at the phrasing, had it not been so plain. I said nothing. I let go of his hand to touch the rock briefly, then took it again. My fingers smelled of stone. His of salt. Together they smelled of something I knew without ever having named it.

We climbed the stair again. In the chapel, the candle burned steadily, as though the walls had found their breath. Lucien stopped at the door. "Go ahead," he said, his voice not commanding.

"Aren't you coming?"

"I'll take another way. I want you to see how the night carries you alone."

I nodded. I opened the door. The darkness outside was no withdrawal, but an offer. I stepped out. The path lay wet but sure, as if newly laid. Behind me I heard no sound, yet knew he stood there until I took the turn. Halfway down I stopped and looked back. The chapel was a dark tooth in the slope, and the round window held a shred of moon. I lifted my hand, though no one could

see me. Then I went on.

The market lay deserted when I reached the first houses. A few tarps flapped as if made from dreams; somewhere a dog snored. From a barrel rose the smell of refuse—fish, bread, something sweet that rain could not save. I went through the lane that by day is too narrow for two to pass, and by night so wide you draw your shoulders in though you don't need to.

When I opened the door of the tower, the air inside was warmer than my skin. I stood for a moment to feel the difference. Then I laid my hand on the table, as if to check it was still there, and laughed softly at myself.

Through the window a piece of sky hung between two clouds. I pictured the cove—not as an image, but as a place in the body where one can breathe again.

Before I blew out the candle, I thought of Adrien. Not as counterweight, not as debt. As part of something larger than what I had understood tonight. I thought of his hands gripping planks, and of the word stay, which did not grow smaller when spoken. Then I thought of Lucien's song. One was a line. The other a circle. I did not know which I preferred to be tonight.

I blew out the candle. In the dark, a shape remained where the air accepted the light that had just been. And somewhere, beyond the rooftops, the night smelled of a cove not marked on any map.

The next evening the village will tire early from the market, but the sea will not. Between dunes and thistles, a narrow descent leads to a cove unnamed on any sign. The water draws back so far that wet sand lies like polished metal in the moon's path. There he waits—not in shadow, not in light, but between—and I step barefoot from my shoes, because the edge of the world knows no heels. We do not speak. We have breath, we have waves. And somewhere, deeper than the surf, a melody moves that does not break.



Chapter 9 **Between Ebb and Flow**



I set out when the ebb tide showed its shoulder. The sandy path behind the houses was darker than the sky, and the dune grass rustled as if it had been waiting for me for days. I carried my shoes in my hand so the straps wouldn't clack, letting my toes sink into the damp sand. Between two bundles of beach grass, the narrower path began, drawing back like a penciled breath. Below me lay the sea—calm at first glance, yet its surface more restless than the wind could explain, as though the water had its own opinion about the night.

The third hill dropped more steeply, as promised. To the left, the grass grew darker—a barely perceptible shadow you'd only see if you knew it. There the descent began,

tighter than comfortable, the sand giving way, the rocks that framed it feeling like old ribs. Twice I slipped, catching myself with one hand on the stone, tasting salt on my fingers. Below, the cove opened, smaller than I'd imagined, yet shaped as if someone had cut a hollow from the shore with a knife—just large enough for two people and everything they wouldn't say.

He was already there, barefoot, trousers rolled to the knee, as if giving the water the courtesy to greet first. The moon lay to one side over his shoulder, a flat, white weight that softened his outline. I paused a heartbeat too long above him, just to watch from a distance, then took the last steps down. There was nothing to say, and the words that came to mind all seemed made of day.

"You're here," he said at last, and it wasn't a statement but an offering.

"I wanted to see if the cove truly belongs to no one," I answered. My voice was deeper than usual; the air made it heavier. He smiled without teeth, just a hint, and stepped aside so I could stand next to him. Before us, the shallow surf breathed, two or three shining strokes in and out. The ebb had pulled the water far back; the exposed sand gleamed in long rails, as if someone had combed the moonlight through it.

"You hear differently here," he said softly.

I listened. He was right. The waves didn't just rush—they came in twin pairs, as if answering themselves. My pulse searched for a rhythm, and after a few breaths found it—not because I sought it, but because it was already there. I felt the weight of my body in the soles of my feet, the fine, cold sting of sand bending into the skin, and the breath at my collarbone that lingered before moving on.

"Come," Lucien said, and walked down the damp sand to where the waves stroked the ground with their last

fingers. I followed. The water reached our ankles—a first, narrow strike, cooler than expected yet instantly bearable. When the next wave came, I felt something in me step forward without my feet moving.

“Do you feel it?” he asked—not urgently, but curiously, as if to know whether we were seeing from the same side.

“I don’t know what to call it.”

“Then don’t name it.”

We stood still, and I noticed then how few sounds the cove kept for itself. The sea spoke, but not loudly. The wind clung to the rocks and made no words. Lucien stepped closer until our shoulders were almost the same temperature. My hand found his wet hair on its own, the way you might stroke a wet dog who is no dog at all—a quiet, unexpectedly natural movement, without permission and without apology. The hair felt dark, even if fingers cannot know color. I brushed aside the strand I’d seen on his forehead at the market. The moon stayed on his skin, as if it considered him someone who had once belonged to it.

“So,” I said, and smiled.

He said nothing. But the hand he kept in the water brushed my ankle—light enough to be an accident, deliberate enough not to be. In the next wave, our knees touched, and I felt my body no longer wanted that short distance. I turned to him. Salt hung in the air—not sharp, more like a hint of where the tongue would go if left to it. I heard his breathing. He heard mine. Our eyes met in that place where cleverness is unlearned.

The sea, which had been breathing shallow, rose suddenly—not much, just a measure over the usual. The wave ran higher, slid over the edge of my shins, tilted, and broke shorter than before with a tone that didn’t belong to

sand. There was no danger in it, but there was an answer. We stood through it without moving, and something in me laughed without my mouth. My heart wasn't faster; it was deeper, as if it had chosen to beat larger instead of more often.

"Between ebb and flow," he said into the wetness dripping from his hair.

"Between us," I replied, knowing only through the word that it was true.

He lifted his hand and laid it on my nape—not heavy, only enough for the skin to know where it belonged. I stepped closer. Our bodies found an angle with no pulling or pushing, just the simple, inexplicable fitting of two weights that did not disturb each other. I felt the warmth of his chest through the wet shirt, felt the fabric of my dress clinging to me, and none of it bothered me—in fact, it made every inch of our skin real.

We said nothing. I let my mouth touch his chin—not to kiss, only to feel—and when I rose a little to leave my lips where they wished, the air burned, though it was cold. A few drops ran down my cheek, and I didn't know if they came from the sea or from him. When I closed my eyes, there was no image. When I opened them, I saw the moon's path trembling on the water's surface, as if someone had just placed our breath into it.

"Stay," he whispered, and for the first time that evening I did not hear the word in Adrien's voice.

I stayed.

The next wave reached our calves, and as it receded, it scraped the sand from under our feet with fine teeth, forcing us to sink half a step to keep our balance. We didn't tip. He laughed quietly—the laugh of a throat that had carried too many serious tones in recent days. I

rested my forehead on his shoulder and felt the afternoon's rain still cool in his shirt in places under the shoulder seams, where the wind could never quite take it out.

"Come," I said, not knowing whether I meant the cove or the opposite.

We walked a few steps out of the water, until the sand was only damp and the skin at my ankles no longer burned. He laid his old linen cloth on the ground—not a coat, not clean, but dry enough to remind us we belonged to the land. We sat down—first side by side, then at an angle, then in one of those positions that happen only when you're not watching how you sit. My hands found his back. It was narrower than it looked; the muscles beneath the skin weren't working—they were simply there. I brushed the shirt aside at his flank; the fabric clung to my fingers, and the change in warmth told me everything a mouth could have said.

Above us, the moon sank slowly without falling; it only tilted its light. The rocks held the cove like hands. In the distance I heard the greater sea working at other shores—muffled, like a memory of storms. Here it was quieter. Here was the space where a sound could reach the skin without asking the head first.

"Don't speak," I murmured as he drew breath, and he nodded so small I didn't see it—I felt it. His fingers counted my ribs without counting, finding the hollow spaces under the edge where the skin is too thin to be nothing. I let my hand slide back into his nape, where my smile had ended that evening. His hair was still wet. I combed through it slowly, and the resistance was just enough to know I wasn't dreaming.

Then the sea lifted a second time—higher than before—without wind, without cause, and rolled up to our thighs.

We held onto each other, not to the ground. The crest broke with a silvery tone, as though something glass-like had cracked inside; as it ebbed, a shimmer clung to the water's skin—not the cold glow you see on some summer nights when something turns blue and then black again. It was a close, soft light that lingered where our bodies had just stood. A print that didn't fade.

I looked at Lucien. His eyes were closed—not in reverence, but to preserve an image. “You see it too,” he said at last.

“Yes.”

“It's answering.”

“What did you ask?”

“Nothing.”

I laughed, and the sea did not. It only lifted once more, lightly, like a short breath after a long sentence.

We stayed until the skin on our arms was dry and our stomachs still wet, until my knees gathered sand and his hands rubbed it away where it didn't belong. There was nothing to prove and nothing to waste—only the fact that the night carried us.

There came a point when time no longer moved forward, but instead lay around us like water. I don't know when it arrived—perhaps in the second I stopped counting the sound of the waves, or in the moment his hand came beneath my hair to my neck and stayed there. We didn't speak. It would have been a special offer to the air, and we had nothing in the basket to show at the checkout.

He lay half on his back, half on me; when we moved, it was to relieve something, not to search for anything. Searching was over. The moon had altered its edge and pushed a slower brightness into the cove. I saw his lashes

so close they seemed like grassy borders, and the vein at his throat running flatter than my breath and yet deeper. He smelled of salt—not the coarse kind, but the kind that remains when water retreats. I put my mouth to his shoulder and left it there. His skin was warm, and the warmth had a core that moved when I breathed.

“I’m here,” I said finally, when it became necessary—not because doubt had come, but because sometimes you leave the night a note in case it reads it later. He didn’t answer. His hand traced a line down my back, from the shoulder’s edge to where the spine seemed to grow into the sand. The line remained. The sea drew the same in foam.

After a while we sat up—not from propriety or tiredness, but because the sea, which had just been tracing our bodies, edged closer as though it wanted to see what we’d do with it. The thin film of water on the sand reached the cloth and left a darker rim like a message. Lucien stood, gave me his hand, and I followed. We went in up to our knees, no farther. The cold was distinct, but it had teeth that did not bite.

“Look,” he said, and skimmed his flat hand across the surface—no force, just enough to spread the skin of the water. In the path of his fingers, light remained. Not strong, not blue—a soft, white dusting, as if filled with tiny visible breaths. I did the same. The sea answered with the same dusting, but denser—so dense that for a moment the movements of our hands became two bright circles that found each other, touched, and then, like embers in the wind, went out.

“They say,” I whispered, “the sea only reflects what you show it.”

“Sometimes it’s quicker.”

“Tonight?”

“Tonight it’s our echo.”

We walked slowly along the line where the waves still wanted, and just barely didn’t. The sand underfoot shifted between smooth and ribbed; where it was ribbed, it held us more firmly, and I liked that. The swell outside hadn’t grown, but it was more ordered now. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a darker, heavier movement run across the northern edge of the cove, as if someone had hooked the current and given it one pull. It was no sign—only a fact. And yet it belonged to this night.

“In the chapel,” I said without looking at him, “you told me the sea answers when you play.”

“Yes.”

“And when you don’t play?”

“Then it answers when it wants.”

“And when it wants?”

He said nothing. I let my half-opened fingers drift through the water and saw how the dusting of light clung to my lines. I lifted my hand. The light held for two heartbeats, then fell away, as if the air had no room for it.

“Sometimes,” he said, “it’s enough that two people breathe.”

The wave that hit us was higher. It came without run-up, carried no wind. It wrapped our knees, our thighs, and in the moment it broke, a fine snowfall of light fell over the water. No star fell; the moon swallowed nothing. It was as if, in the break—when the wave dissolved into itself—there was a remainder that no longer knew whether it belonged above or below, and so it revealed itself. I laughed, and the laugh made the tone in my throat vibrate; I felt Lucien had the same tone beneath his fingers as he held my back.

"You laugh when it could be dangerous," he said quietly.

"Is it dangerous?"

"Not tonight," he answered, "but the sea remembers better than we do."

That was when Séraphine's words from last night didn't return, but only the shadow of her voice: Do not fear the depth. Fear what you do not bring to light. I looked at the cove, saw us, saw the trace of our feet and the waves that erased them. It didn't frighten me, but it was a knowledge you couldn't put in your pocket.

We returned to the edge of the cloth. Lucien wrung out his shirt, and the sound was so ordinary that I loved it. I sat, drew my dress up slightly at the hem, and laid my fingers to my shins, still holding the cold, brushing it away as if to remove sand. He sat behind me so his body became the backrest that wasn't there. I leaned against him. The closeness was different now—not less, but calmer, as though the sea had brought us to a temperature one could keep.

"I don't know what we're doing," I said, "and I don't hate it."

"You know enough," he replied. His lips were near my ear; when he spoke, the words were less heard than carried. "We're between."

"Between what?"

"Between ebb and flow. Between song and silence. Between what may be danced and what only exists standing still." He laughed softly. "We're a harbor built at sea."

"That holds only in good weather."

"Tonight is good."

I turned my head, let my forehead fall against his cheek. We stayed like that for a time that no clock knew. At the northern rock tongue, something heavier passed through again—a movement that sought the eye. It didn't come closer. Yet I saw it, and it saw me, and that was enough.

"I'll come back," I said finally. It was no promise and no threat—just the name for what I was already doing.

"So will I," he said.

"Tomorrow?"

"If the tide allows."

"It allows much, if you ask."

"It asks back."

He reached out, and his fingers ran slowly down my arm until they lay at my wrist, where sometimes the pulse beats too near the skin. He didn't press—he only placed his finger lightly there, and there it was: my heart moved into my hand. It beat louder there for a moment, and in the cove, very softly, the sea lifted with it. I heard it—not in my ears, but in whatever lies beyond them.

"It reflects," I whispered.

"It remembers."

We stood again. The moon had cut the dunes differently now; the climb would have a new order. Before we headed toward the rock, I looked out once more. Outside, beyond the edge, light flickered. No boat. No house. Just a brief flare that wanted nothing but to be. I took my shoes in my hand without putting them on.

"Go ahead," Lucien said, "I'll stay a moment. I want to hear how the sea reacts to our parting when it has it to itself."

"It will pretend nothing happened."

“It will remember.”

I climbed the first steps up. The sand gave way, the grass crept to my ankles. Halfway up, I turned. He stood in the water to his ankles, hands at his sides, as though he had held something and was letting it go. I lifted my hand. He lifted his. That was enough.

I walked slower than I had on the way here—not to buy time; the night sold nothing—but to let my skin remain itself while wind and salt tugged at it. Behind the dunes, the village was a flat darkness where, now and then, a moving yellowish square blinked—a window that weariness hadn’t yet found. The planks at the small pier below knocked, wood on wood, like two things long acquainted practicing a new greeting.

I stopped before the tower. The door, as always, was unlocked; the latch knew my hand. I stepped inside, and the silence there was different from the one outside. It was more gathered, as if the air stood in shelves. I took off my dress—not hurried, not ceremonial, just the way you put away something that doesn’t belong to sleep. My skin smelled of the sea, but not the harbor. I laid my cheek against the window frame. The wood was cooler than the night.

I could have slept. My body wanted to. Something in me wanted to listen. I blew out the candle, didn’t lie down, but sat at the bed’s edge. With my eyes closed, I saw the cove—smaller than it is, nearer than it was. I saw the trace of our feet, brief, then gone. I saw the wave that came once higher, without wind. And I saw the light in its break—quiet as the last syllable of a word you say to someone you don’t want to wake.

In the morning, the sky was clearer than it should have been after a night like this. I drank water that tasted faintly of tin and ate bread too old to please—perfect for

someone who didn't want a full mouth. My hands did what they always did: wiped the table, opened the window, looked for shoes. My body knew how to act as though nothing had happened. My skin knew it was lying.

By afternoon, as the wind shifted from west to south and the gulls flew lower, I went to the yard. Adrien stood at the hull, his back to the light as though he could carry it on his shoulders. His hands were black with pitch, and I'd long known the line of his mouth. He saw me, and his gaze didn't stop where I was—it went farther, as if seeking the place I no longer was.

"You were out," he said.

"I was here," I answered.

He nodded—not in agreement, not in reproach, but as a gesture offering conversation. He drank, handed me the cup, and I drank too. The taste was familiar, and so were his eyes, and nothing about that moment hurt. Only later, as I left, did I notice that something in his silence had a second floor—not accusation, but a permission that wasn't light.

I returned early to the dunes. The air had kept the warmth long enough for it to remain in the skin even after the sun was gone. The path was the same, but my feet landed differently now, as if they knew the spots where the sand was less sure than at night. The third hill dropped steep again; the grass on the left was dark again. I took the steps that weren't steps, feeling the same places give way underfoot as yesterday, pleased they still did.

He wasn't there yet. I sat on the edge of a flat stone, drew my knees up, laid my forehead on them, let my arms hang loose. The sea was flatter today, and the ebb had gone farther; the smooth sand it left looked like a pressed page. I heard my breathing clearly, and at first I thought the sea had grown quieter. Then I heard that it was only

speaking deeper.

Lucien came quietly. I heard him before I saw him—not because his steps made noise (they barely did), but because something in me gave way, like a door already open you don’t want to slam. I raised my head. He stood beside the stone, empty-handed, and looked at me as though I were the reason the cove seemed larger today.

“You’re here,” he said.

“So are you.”

He didn’t sit. He remained standing, and in that stance there was no distance—only a space I liked. I stood as well. We didn’t go into the water—not yet. Our skin knew how cold it could be when the wind changed its mind. He brushed a grain of sand from my hair. It wasn’t his hand that stayed—it was the grain that left. I set my fingers at his temple and felt the light, deep warmth beneath—the kind you have when you’ve stood before the water and it hasn’t taken you.

“Today it speaks differently,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because we answered yesterday.”

We did go in, to our ankles, then farther until the water lay at our calves. It was colder than yesterday; I liked that—it sharpened the skin. We stood, and again there was that moment when the sea heard our hearts. It rose—not high—just enough for the wave to reach our skin and leave a few drops on our backs that ran like small creatures.

His hand rested at my waist. Not heavy. Not hesitant. An assumption. I turned, set myself sideways to him so the waves wouldn’t push us together. He understood the turn

without looking. Our mouths found each other in a way that needed no art, no courage. It was simply there, like water reaching the shore even if no one watches. We kissed—not long, not short—just enough not to leave the taste of salt to the sea.

The sea answered, and more clearly this time. The swell came with two, three breaths in between, and then, without warning, a higher wave broke crosswise into the cove and flooded up to the edge of our cloth. It didn't carry us—it pressed us. We didn't stumble. We stayed. As it receded, it left in the sand a deeper, uneven shadow, as though someone had written in it by hand. I felt a brief, clean sting at the outside of my knee—perhaps a bit of shell—and I even liked that.

“That was for us,” I said.

“Or against us,” he said.

“Against?”

“Not hostile. Just... attentive.”

I looked at him. His eyes held nothing to fear, but something to take seriously. I nodded—small—and the sea did the same in its next barely visible lift.

We stayed until the tide turned. It wasn't abrupt—more like a great, calm hand taking a slightly deeper breath and then going on speaking. The moon was lower, and the distance between it and us suddenly shorter—not in meters, but in what images do to skin. We sat again, closer than yesterday, and I felt the fatigue in my legs not as fatigue but as a kind of knowledge worth keeping.

“There's a boundary,” he said so softly that my cheek heard the words before my ears. “Not here. Not now. But it's there.”

“I know.”

“You can smell it.”

“Yes.”

“And you go anyway.”

“I’m not going—I’m staying.”

“Both.”

I placed my hand on his chest—not to count a heartbeat, but to show I understood the word. Beneath my fingers there was no hurry and no fear—only what is valid between ebb and flow: arrival that needs no fanfare.

The cove grew shallower again. A bird called once, without repeating. I stood, slipped my dress down to the waist, and left it there. The air lay well on my skin. He didn’t look at me, as if he’d set himself a rule that had nothing to do with shame. He only stepped back a decent pace—one that didn’t need to be taken—and then came close again, so close that the difference was gone. We touched, skin to skin—not wild, not fearful, not something in between. Like water being rock when it stays long enough. My hands found ways in him, his in me. None of it was hurried. All of it was necessary.

When we lay again, I heard far off—well beyond the northern tongue—another sound. No boat. No call. Just a short, heavy tearing, like when a net doesn’t rip where it’s weak but where it meant to be strong. I lifted my head; Lucien did too. We saw nothing. The waves that came were ordinary. And yet the sound stayed lodged in the sand, pretending to belong to us.

“Tomorrow,” I said, “when the ebb stays this side of the rocks.”

“Tomorrow,” he said, and it was no arrangement but a sentence fulfilling itself.

We climbed the edge. I didn’t look back. I knew he’d

remain until the sea decided to keep the night. At the top of the rise I felt the wind from the village—it smelled of things you don't take to sea: oil, bread, iron. I liked it; it balanced me. I had two halves, and they no longer argued.

That night, already in bed, I heard a distant rolling. Not thunder, not surf—something in between. It reminded me of a barrel bouncing on wood. I got up, went to the window. The sky was clear. The sea wasn't high. But out on the line lay a longer, darker fold, as if someone had pinched the edge between thumb and forefinger. It didn't move toward us. It stayed. I pulled back, and the thought stayed at the glass.

The next day I worked with Adrien. We spoke little. His hands showed me a new wood that cut easier if you gave it time. My hands gave it time. At the end he said, "Stay in the village tonight." It didn't sound urgent, but there was something in it—like when someone doesn't close the door and you understand they want it kept that way.

"Why?" I asked.

"No reason."

"I can't," I said, and he nodded as if he'd known before I spoke. We parted with the care of people who know they're standing on the same pier even if they face opposite ways.

The cove was early. The light came later. I waited on the dune until the edge was dark enough not to betray whoever crossed it. The air was warmer than yesterday; my skin took it with it. I went down, setting my feet in the same streams of sand I'd used yesterday, and they accepted me without asking what I brought. Below lay the cove. Lucien stood in the water, head bowed. He didn't lift it until my steps spoke in the dampness.

"It'll come higher today," he said—no greeting, no

concern, just a piece of information you love.

“How high?”

“Enough.”

We kissed before the water reached us. I didn’t notice where the warmth running down my back came from; it wasn’t from his hands, not from the moon, not from me. It was as if the night had raised the temperature once, just to keep us. Then the sea came, and it came high—higher than yesterday’s break. It reached our thighs, held there, and in that holding we found our own—skin that didn’t want to draw back; hands that didn’t search but found; mouths that didn’t know the word later. The sea played no song—it only laid the same order in the waves that our breaths had.

A single, slanting wave broke over the northern tongue. It was narrow and fast, as if it had its own mission. When it struck us, I felt a brief, clear prick—not pain, more a call to attention. I lifted my head. In the distance, on the open water, a light flared briefly, as if someone had struck a match over wet wood. The glow didn’t hold, but the trace stayed as a dark line in my vision, even when I blinked.

“It’s watching,” I said.

“Who?”

“Not who. What.”

He nodded. We didn’t move apart. We only kept our eyes open longer than necessary. Then I closed mine, set my forehead to his neck, and the world had the right height again.

We stayed until the edge of the tide licked at the rocks. The way back was steeper than yesterday. Twice I stepped off line—not deep, just enough for the sand to remind me at the ankles. At the top of the dune I stopped and

looked back. The cove was still there. The line outside was still darker. And in my belly something had begun that was slower than the heart and deeper. No fire—not yet. An ember under salt.

When the night comes again, the wind is warmer, the moon lower, and the cove has the breath of an animal you can stroke—until it rises. Our skin now knows the other's ways; our mouths know them too. And yet: in the stillness between two crests, something is gathering, like sparks under a hand. A touch in the half-light will burn the word later, and the sea will remember to whom it names the price.



Chapter 10

A Heart of Salt and Fire



The roar of the sea stayed like a heartbeat behind us as we walked along the narrow path that disappeared between the rocks. The moon hung low, its light lying in shards upon the water's surface, as if someone had shattered the silver of the sky and poured it into the sea. Lucien walked ahead, his step sure, as though he could find his way here even with his eyes closed. I followed, tasting the cool salt in the air that clung to my lips. My hand brushed fleetingly against the rock – rough and cold – and each step carried us further into a silence filled only with the breath of the surf.

The cave appeared first as a dark slit in the stone, hardly visible until Lucien stepped aside and let me pass

through. Inside, it was warmer; the wind stayed outside, and the echo of the waves filled the space like an invisible movement. The water reached within a few steps of us, retreating only to return and lap softly against the sand.

„No one comes here,“ he said, his voice echoing gently against the walls.

I stepped further in. The moonlight fell through a narrow opening in the ceiling, laying a pale circle on the floor in which the fine droplets suspended in the air glimmered.

My eyes needed a moment to adjust to the darkness, but then I saw how he was looking at me – calmly, as though he had been waiting for exactly this moment.

His coat smelled of sea and night as he took it off and let it fall aside. I heard the faint sound of fabric on stone, then he stepped closer. His hand found my waist with a certainty as if it had always known its way there.

I felt the warmth of his fingers through the thin fabric, and my breath quickened without my moving. The scent of salt, skin, and something darker hung in the air, heavy and sweet at once.

„Your hands are cold,“ he said quietly.

„And yours warm.“

He smiled barely perceptibly and drew me a little closer, so that my chest could feel his breath. Outside, a wave struck harder against the rocks, as though to underline the moment.

I did not know who moved first, but suddenly we were so close that the air between us no longer existed. His hair was still slightly damp from the sea, and when I brushed a strand from his forehead, my hand lingered at his cheek.

He laid his fingers over mine, pressing them gently against his skin, and in that moment the sea seemed to stand still.

„You don’t know what you’re doing to me,“ he whispered.

I could have answered, but my voice was lost somewhere

between heart and throat. Instead, I let him draw me deeper into the shadows of the cave, to where the moonlight fell on our skin only in narrow lines.

The roar of the surf grew deeper, almost like a drawing of breath. I felt my heart find the same rhythm, as if it had always been meant for this moment.

He stood so close that the hem of his shirt brushed my arm. I did not only hear his breath; I felt it lay warm and even upon my skin like a secret tide. My fingers slid over the fabric, felt the firm muscle beneath, and without intending to, my hand sought an anchor at his side.

The moonlight crept along the rock wall, breaking his outline into silver and shadow. In this half-light he looked like someone not entirely of this world – a figure shaped by the sea itself.

His hand on my waist barely moved, yet the pressure changed – firmer, more certain. I felt him drawing me subtly closer, and my body followed as though it had decided long before my mind understood. The coolness of the rock behind me contrasted with the heat of his nearness, and each heartbeat seemed to change the echo of the sea in the cave.

„There are things you can't take back,“ he murmured, his gaze lingering on my lips.

„And if you don't want to?“ My voice was scarcely more than a breath, but he heard it; I saw it in the way his eyes darkened.

He lifted his hand, brushed his thumb along my jaw so softly it almost hurt. His gaze wandered over my face as though he wanted to memorise every line. I felt exposed and safe at once.

Outside, the rhythm of the waves shifted. The water drew audibly back, as if gathering strength, and then a high wave struck the entrance of the cave. The impact sent a fine spray into the space, like cool fingers gliding over my skin.

I closed my eyes, feeling his forehead rest against mine.

For a moment we breathed the same breath. Then he laid his lips upon mine, first hesitantly, as though to test whether he was allowed. When I did not pull away, the kiss deepened – and with it the thundering of the sea. My heartbeat quickened, and I lost all sense of time. His hands slid along my back, found the line of my spine, stayed there while he drew me closer. I smelled the salt in his skin, tasted it on his lips.

His warmth seeped through every layer of fabric, and when he pulled me into the circle of light under the opening, I saw how the droplets falling from above gathered upon his skin. One slid from his throat along the line of his collarbone, and without thinking I traced it with my finger.

He inhaled deeply, set a hand at my neck, and when our lips found each other again, there was no hesitation – only claim. The sea responded; a wave rolled far into the cave so that the water played around my ankles. Warm and cold at once, like the moment itself.

His hands found the hem of my dress, slid over it carefully, as though to test whether he might go further. My answer lay not in words but in the way I sank my fingers into his hair and kissed him more deeply.

The pounding in my ears was not only my pulse; it was also the sea, louder now, more insistent, as though it were urging us on or warning us. A part of me remembered Séraphine's words, the shadow that might fall between us – but it was far away, lost in the roar.

He lifted me slightly; my feet left the ground, and I felt my back meet the smooth rock. His body held me – sure and unyielding – while his lips found my neck. Every kiss burned, and each flare of that heat was mirrored outside in another wave.

„You are...“ He broke off, breathing hard, „... more than I thought I would ever find.“

My hands rested on his shoulders, felt the tension in his muscles. I wanted to reply, but he stole my breath with

the next kiss.

The sea surged once more into the cave, swirled around our legs, withdrew as though it had taken something and left something behind.

I knew the moment had changed us – that there was no going back. And I knew I did not want to.

His breath was warm at my throat, and I felt every single second in which he paused only to touch me more deliberately. The rock at my back was cool, his body before me burned, and somewhere in between was I – taut like a rope stretching in the wind.

He lowered his head, his lips tracing the line of my collarbone. Where his skin met mine, the sea seemed to answer – a gentle swelling of the waves that formed into a pulsing rhythm. I closed my eyes, and in the darkness behind my lids there was only the roar, wrapping around me like a second skin.

Lucien lifted me so that I could feel him – solid, inescapable. My hands slid from his shoulders into his hair, holding him where I wanted him. The warmth of his hand at my waist rose higher, following a line I had never felt so distinctly within myself.

„You’re like...” He faltered, searching for a word. „... like the first wave after the stillness.“

I wanted to laugh, but my throat was dry, and my lips only found his again. The kiss was slower this time, deeper, as though we both wanted to store away every movement.

A wave broke louder than the rest, and a spray of salt blew into the cave. The droplets struck our skin, cold, and only made the warmth between us flare brighter. His hands slid along my sides, paused, then found a new path. My breath quickened, not only because of the movement, but because I felt that he was no longer asking – he was taking. And I let him, even pulled him closer, until there was no space left at all.

The sea swelled, a series of waves rolling in, each a beat

in time with our breathing. I could not tell whether the sea was guiding us, or we the sea.

His forehead rested briefly against mine, and in that breath Séraphine's voice flickered in my mind: There are fires not meant for warmth. Yet before the thought could take root, he drowned it with a kiss that gathered everything in me – fear, desire, curiosity – and turned it into a single current.

The minutes stretched, heavy and bright at once. I felt every muscle, every small tremor as he moved. My fingers traced paths across his skin, felt the salty dampness that could have come from the sea or from us.

A final rise – like the wave that breaks before the shore – and then only the deep, even roar that let us sink together into the arms of the sand.

We stayed in the shadows, our foreheads resting together, and the sea returned to a calmer breath. My hands rested on his chest, feeling the heartbeat that gradually slowed.

„There is no way back,“ he said at last, his voice quiet but firm.

„I don't want one.“

He brushed a wet strand from my face, his gaze dark and yet strangely vulnerable. „Then you must know they will talk. And not all words are kind.“

I did not understand everything, but enough to sense that he meant more than what had happened between us.

We dressed, every gesture accompanied by a silent knowing that the world outside had changed while we were here. When we left the cave, the moon hung lower, and the light had taken on something cooler.

The path back to the village was quiet, only our steps and the distant rumble of the surf accompanied us. Just before we reached the first houses, he stopped.

„Tomorrow will be different,“ he said, without looking at me.

I could have asked why, but something held me back. Instead, I walked on, feeling his gaze on my back.

When I entered the harbour of Marenveil, I heard muffled voices carried on the wind – names, half-sentences, a word that clung in me like a shadow: guilt. I did not know what it meant, but I knew it belonged to him. And that it would find us.



Chapter 11 **The Lies of the Harbor**



The morning smelled of salt and paint, of tar and fresh rope, as if the night had taken a brush to the sea and repainted the harbor of Marenveil in a shimmering, expectant light. Above the masts fluttered pennants in blue and cinnabar, in a green reminiscent of seaweed, and in a yellow as bright as lemon peel on a wooden workbench. The merchants had already lined up their stalls, baskets filled with gleaming mackerel, baskets with mussels laced with fine, almost delicate veins. In front of the sheds lay coiled nets beside wound ropes that clung to one another like sleeping snakes.

I carried the basket with the last glass bottles my father had filled during the night—inside them shimmered the

oil meant to polish the lighthouse lamps later. My hands smelled of linseed oil and metal, and I still felt the gentle, uneven burn of the memory of the cave, the warmth of Lucien's skin that continued to smolder inside me like the core of a stone that had lain in the sun. Every step seemed to shift those images slightly: his voice, deep and quiet, as if it came from a distance where waves press against an unseen wall; his fingers tracing my name on my shoulder; the breath that brushed over my lips like the faint gust now drifting in from the water.

"Heroinel!" someone called, and I blinked against the light pooling on the damp planks. The call came not from the direction of the sheds but from the steps leading down to the boats. Adrien stood half in the shadow of a canopy, his hair neatly smoothed back, his vest a blue that looked almost royal. His gaze was fixed on me, yet he didn't seem to truly see me; his eyes lingered beyond me, somewhere among the men gathered in small groups, forming protective pockets in which words could be whispered and weighed.

"Just a moment," I said, setting the basket down so the handle wouldn't cut into my fingers. The wood of the planks was still cool beneath my soles, damp from the night, and the air carried the bright clink of fishermen sliding knives into leather sheaths. I saw women tying ribbons to posts, humming in between in a rhythm that recalled an old song—one that spoke of the wind being kind if we called it kindly, and forgiving if we made ourselves small before its great breath.

Adrien stepped toward me until his shoulders cut into the edges of the light. He smiled, but it was not the smile I knew. It was narrower, firmer, holding something back, as if afraid an unguarded twitch might strip him of a piece of his power. "You should hear this," he said quietly. "Before it reaches you from a stranger's mouth."

“What should I hear?” I stepped a half-pace closer, the oil in the basket behind me giving off a warmer scent as if the sun had roused it.

He glanced over his shoulder, toward where the men stood. “They’re talking about him. That d’Aubremont.”

At his name, I realized how much I had been waiting for that sound since the night in the cave. It brought the image of Lucien forward, and I felt my lips part slightly, as if they wanted to reach for a word that had not yet come.

“What are they saying?” I asked. The wind tucked my hair behind my ear, carrying with it the whisper of sails already stretched for drying: a soft crackle, a pull, a release, again and again, like a breath.

“That he has debts.” Adrien spoke the word with the sharpness of a blade drawn across flint. “And not just coins owed. A debt that follows him. Like a curse.”

I felt something rise within me—not defense, but a clear, keen alertness. “A curse,” I repeated, and it tasted foolish in my mouth, like a tale told to children to keep them from touching the ropes. “Who started this story?”

Adrien tilted his head slightly. The sun had left a narrow, bright line along his cheekbone, running to his ear.

“From men who know the sea,” he said. “From one who sailed with him.”

“What was his name?” My voice was calm, but my heart beat faster, ready to examine every foreign word like a piece of cloth held up to the light.

“There are several names,” Adrien evaded. “Too many to hold onto. But they say a ship went down, and he played a part no man in our town would forgive another for.”

I saw a piece of silk—cinnabar red—strung between two

posts flare up as the sun struck it, so suddenly and vividly it took my breath away. Sometimes, I thought, color is a language, and today it seemed to call louder than any chapel bell. “Which ship?”

“The names change in the men’s mouths,” Adrien said tonelessly. “Sometimes they call it the ‘Épervier,’ sometimes the ‘Fleur d’Or.’ But the story stays.

D’Aubremont broke a promise to save his own life. Some say he owed the sea something—a life for a life. And the sea now demands its due.”

I might have laughed, yet the laugh caught in my throat, for the memory of the cave, of the rhythm of the waves merging with the warmth of our bodies, rose inside me like a bird pausing mid-flight. That night, Lucien had spoken of a “debt.” Not in words, not fully, but I had heard it in his breath, in the way he lowered his head as if I might see the glow in his eyes. There had been a shadow there, just at the edge of his smile. I had not pushed it away.

“Rumors,” I said, unsure whether to him or to myself.

“Rumors are wood shavings in the air. They gleam briefly in the sunlight and then fall into the water.”

“Some drift for a long time,” Adrien replied, stepping so close I could smell his cologne—herbaceous, with a trace of lavender. “And some grow wings.”

Behind us, a fiddle began to play—a bright, dance-hungry melody carried by a drumbeat. A boy shouted, someone laughed, and the harbor caught the sounds, scattering them across the planks and reflecting them in the sails, still not yet set but standing like praying hands in the light. A few women put on masks—light half-masks of painted wood, feathers brushing across their foreheads. The Festival of the Wind was almost here. It tinged the morning with anticipation.

“Adrien,” I said, my voice steady despite the tremor I had expected. “Why tell me this?”

It took him a moment to answer. “Because you know me,” he said finally. “And because I know you. Because once you decide on something, you carry the sea in your veins and cannot be easily turned. You...” He broke off, opening his hand as if letting an invisible coin fall. “I don’t want to see you burned. Especially not by a man who plays with damp matches.”

I felt the warmth inside me take on another quality. It did not fade, but it stepped back to make room for an alertness that burned without consuming. “And if the matches are dry?” I asked softly. “If the man himself is the flame?”

Adrien lifted his gaze to the water. A gust skimmed the surface, leaving only a handful of tiny ripples that smoothed themselves away. “Then,” he said quietly, “he will ignite you rather than warm you.”

Someone called his name. The call carried the restlessness of a startled flock. Adrien turned his head and nodded without looking away. Only when the call came a second time, sharper, did his gaze return to me. “I am not your enemy,” he said, with a wounded pride that neither boasted nor pleaded, but endured in silence. “But I will not watch you be carried off. Not by him. Not when the sea already laps at his hem.”

He left, and I stood with the basket by the planks, watching him go. A strip of silk tore loose from a post, leapt in the wind like a flame, and slapped back against the beam. The sound was almost tender.

I lifted the basket and moved on, slower now, as though the boards had lengthened. Color hung everywhere in the air: the blue of pennants reflected in the damp planks; the red of a mask held by a freckled girl who peeked

through its eyeholes with a giggle; the green of a cloth an old man stretched so high it seemed he meant to wipe the sky itself. The music—fiddle, drum, flute—swelled, broke, and swelled again, seeking its shape like a wave finding its rhythm. The smell of tar mingled with the scent of roasted almonds, caramelizing sugar making my mouth water.

“Rumors,” I murmured again, touching the smooth glass bottle in the basket. Beneath my thumb was a tiny bubble in the glass, barely perceptible but there. Sometimes, I thought, it is the smallest flaws that catch all the light.

I would have liked to find Lucien at once, to ask him what names had been given to his shadow in the mouths of men. But I knew he was rarely here in the morning. He came when the wind shifted, when the air grew sweeter and the harbor shadows longer—in the afternoon, in that hour when sounds turn to music and colors to signs. I would have to wait. I am not good at waiting. The sea isn’t either. I felt it grinding its teeth just beneath the smooth face of the bay.

As I delivered the bottles, I heard words clink like mussel shells: “d’Aubremont”; “debt”; “headwind”; “promise”; “a life for a life.” They threaded between the fiddle notes, claiming their own right to speak in music. I saw Adrien again later—talking to a fisherman whose face was so weathered it seemed the sun had decided to live there forever. Adrien listened intently. He did not look at me. Not once.

By midday, when the sun had thinned the shadows at the posts to narrow lines, a brief spray of rain passed over the bay, no more than a fine breath that freshened the lashes and darkened the planks for a moment. The fiddle did not stop; the rain was too small for that, as if it tickled her strings. I lifted my face, drank the drops, and somewhere inside me a thought moved—neither fear nor

comfort, only a thin line pointing toward truth.

Lucien appeared in the crowd as the fiddle struck up a dance built on stamping feet and clapping hands. I saw him before he saw me—saw the cut of his coat, the shadow-smile at his mouth's corners that never quite reached his eyes, and for that very reason was dangerously beautiful. He wore no mask yet, but around his neck hung a black ribbon bearing a piece of wood: a half-mask, unfeathered, simply painted, its lines plain, as if someone valued the shape for itself without ornament.

The moment he saw me, the rhythm inside my body changed. Not faster—no. Rather, the melody shifted key almost imperceptibly, and everything in me tuned to it, as if my steps had always known where I was going. He came to me, and the harbor opened a narrow path between the stalls, as if by accident rather than intent.

“You shine like something just risen from the waves,” he said, barely audible. His voice was softer than the music should have allowed, yet it carried every syllable to my skin. Warmth rose in my cheeks.

“I’ve been looking for you,” I answered. “More precisely: I’ve been waiting.”

He lifted a hand—not to touch my face, but to brush back a loose strand stuck to my ear as though weighed with salt. “I know.”

“They’re talking,” I said without preamble, just as Adrien had warned me, but without a knife. I held no blade in my hand, only an open palm. “Here. About you.”

He nodded. It was not a surprised nod. Rather, it was one that welcomed a truth expected long for its sharpness. “Of course they are.”

“They say you carry a debt.” I forced myself to remain direct. “And that it clings to you like a curse.”

Lucien did not glance toward the water. He looked at me, as though in the pale rings of my eyes lay a map he needed to read. "Words are light things," he said calmly. "They stick to us when we sweat. But some are heavier than others. Some are true."

There it was—the admission. A window opened without any wind to push it. I held his gaze. "Which are true?"

He gave a small smile, without gentleness. It was a smile that observed itself. "Which would you like to hear? The ones that comfort you? Or the ones you already know without knowing?"

"The ones that can breathe," I said. "And not fall dead in the mouth."

His hand, which had touched the strand, lowered with the care of a rope being slowly loosened. "There is a debt," he said. "Yes. It is woven not only of coins. There is a promise in it, hooked deep. Sometimes into my hands, sometimes my gaze, sometimes my sleep. Today..." He brushed past me so closely his cheek left a trace of desert at my jaw's edge. "Today, the festival will distract you. The music, the masks. But the sea knows what was borrowed. And what must be returned."

"A life for a life," I said, more to myself, having heard the words from other tongues. He did not nod. He only looked at me. And then laughed briefly, without joy.

"The men in the harbor are good storytellers," he said. "And the sea pays them in tales when the catch is poor. It wasn't like that. Or not exactly. But it was..." He half-turned, letting his shadow touch my feet. "Later. When the masks have been ours for a while."

The music swelled at that moment, as if waiting for his line. Drums struck like hearts briefly out of rhythm before finding it again. Over the masts, gulls traced a tight

figure eight, their cries taking on that bright, faintly hollow tone they only have when the air is very clear.

"I'll be here," I said. "When you speak."

Lucien lowered his gaze, and the shadow of his lashes cut a pattern into the skin beneath his eyes. "I know."

He was already half gone when I saw Adrien at the edge of a group. Adrien's face was too calm—the calm of freshly stretched cloth not yet touched by the first gust. He did not look at Lucien. He looked at me. Only me. And it was as if the harbor's colors had shifted a shade darker.

I smoothed my apron though it was already smooth, and I breathed. The sea did the same. Slowly. Deeply. As if knowing that from now on, every word, every step, every glance would carry the taste of salt that never truly leaves the mouth.

The afternoon took the town into its hand like something to be turned and held up to the light. Marenveil became translucent with anticipation; everywhere glasses clinked, cloths were straightened, masks were tried on, their eyeholes rearranging faces in secret ways. I set aside my headscarf, washed my hands—the linseed oil yielded only slowly—and allowed one of the women to braid ribbons into my hair. They were narrow and blue, that special shade the harbor knew and called "late water": a blue that hinted at green in its depths and at the edges ran into something almost silvery. I didn't look in the mirror, but I felt the ribbons against my skin like slender, cool fingers.

The air smelled now more strongly of sweetness. Someone had dropped fritters into oil; the dough swelled and turned gold, and the sugar sprinkled over them fell like light snow. An accordion joined the fiddle, and from the first notes it gave the piers a rounded, supple feel, as though they might yield if the steps grew too hard.

Children darted between the stalls, their masks too large for their faces—cats, foxes, a crow with black feathers that rustled softly in the wind.

Adrien found me as I was adjusting the shells in a basket, neatly stacked, each a variation of brown and ivory. He now carried a mask in his hand, pale, its surface overlaid with fine mother-of-pearl; it showed nothing animal, nothing grotesque—only a calm, almost still face whose mouth did not quite smile. “The music is getting louder,” he said without clearing his throat. “The festival starts earlier than usual.”

“The wind is turning,” I replied, because it was true. It had shifted in a way too subtle to measure in strength—rather in temperature: it no longer smelled solely of salt, but carried a trace of warmth, as if from another harbor far away, on a coast with darker sand than ours.

“They’re still talking,” Adrien said. “And they’ll keep talking tonight, when the drums keep their tongues awake. It’s easy to grow brotherhood when a shared name sits on the tip.”

“Lucien is not a shared name,” I said calmly, lifting a shell as though it were an ear that might whisper to me. “He belongs to no one.”

“He belongs to his debt,” Adrien replied almost gently. “And anyone who binds themselves to a man bound to something invisible binds themselves to that invisible thing as well.”

I set down the shell. “What are you afraid of, Adrien?”

He was silent longer than such a simple question should have allowed. Then he lifted the mask toward my face without placing it on me. “Of a storm that doesn’t come from the sky,” he said. “One that grows from the two of you. You are—” He exhaled almost soundlessly. “You are

the lighthouse and the ship at once. You'll either break on him or bring him home. I don't know which is worse."

I didn't smile. It would have felt unkind to smile now.
"And you?"

"I'm the shore." He drew the mask back. "Solid. Hard. Reliable. But I know there are men who despise the shore because it gives them boundaries."

"It's not the boundaries," I said softly. "It's the narrowness."

The fiddle's note climbed—so bright it burned briefly in my ear. Adrien didn't flinch. He looked over my shoulder, and I knew without turning that Lucien had arrived. It was as if his shadow had come a second before he did. I saw only Adrien's face tighten, and at the same time a fatigue settle around his eyes I had never seen in him before.

"D'Aubremont," Adrien said, so neutrally it was an art.

"Moreau," Lucien returned. His voice was like the shine on a blade: no threat, only the plainness that cuts because it does not pretend to be anything else.

I turned. Lucien had now tied on the black half-mask; it sat just below his forehead, leaving his mouth free. It suited him by both taking and giving something: it took a portion of his legibility, it gave him a lightness his eyes did not otherwise know. "It suits you," I said, only then noticing my heart was beating so hard I felt it in my fingertips.

"You're wearing the color of late water," he replied, his gaze brushing the ribbons in my hair. "I wanted you—" He broke off, tilting his head as if listening to a tone running beneath all the others. "We should speak elsewhere."

“The festival is starting,” Adrien said. “Everyone can see you. They will...” He shook his head, as though he had found the end of the sentence and thrown it away. “It would be wiser, Heroine, to choose distance and dance today. In that order.”

“I’ve never danced wisely,” I replied. “Only truthfully.”

Lucien made a quick, fluid motion, stepping toward me without yet touching. “Come,” he said, and his voice held an urgency not of fear but of wanting to finish something before too many hands tangled in it.

I went. It was no decision, but a following—like water follows when shown the slope. I didn’t hear Adrien behind us; I heard only the music, thicker now in the air, as if no longer passing through us but settling over us like cloth. We slid past two stalls, turned into the shadow between the warehouse and the sailmaker’s shop. In the coolness hung the taut scent of hemp. The planks here were dry, the dust finer, as if made of stories no one told aloud anymore.

Lucien stopped, running his fingers along the edge of his mask without removing it. “They speak of a debt,” he said, his voice now different—bare, almost. “That is not new. But today the words have sharper teeth. Someone is feeding them.”

“Someone?”

“A man who isn’t a coward,” Lucien said, and the corners of his mouth twitched without smiling. “That’s dangerous. Courage and bitterness make a combustible mix.”

I thought of Adrien. His calm face. The mother-of-pearl mask. His hands that never trembled, knowing how to hold things without breaking them. I said nothing.

“I owe no one gold,” Lucien continued. “That I would

have long since paid. I owe the sea no life stolen for my own. But I owe something heavier than coins and lighter than blood. A promise.”

“What kind of promise?” My breathing stayed even; I made it stay even. In my ears, I could hear it swimming against the sound of distant drums.

“I sailed on a ship,” he said. “It carried names we changed like shirts, depending on where we made port. In a summer so pale the sun seemed afraid to come all the way down to us. We took on a man bent like a reed. He asked us to carry a cargo...” He paused. “No. He asked us to carry a memory from one shore to another. Something he could no longer carry himself. I promised it. I promised to deliver it whole.”

“A memory?” I only realized, in my own word, how strange it sounded—and in the same instant, how right.

“That’s what he called it. A small chest. Not large. Lighter than it looked.” He lifted his hand as though holding something the size of a cat. “We were caught in a storm. Not a great one. Just wrong. It came too quickly, turned too often. We lost a mast. The man fell. He held to me—not out of fear, but from reflex. I...” He closed his eyes briefly. “I held him. I did not hold the chest.”

“What was in it?” My voice thinned, as if measuring the hollow the not-knowing cut into me.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I only know the sea took it. I brought the man to a new shore. I brought him to the one who awaited the chest. And I said: ‘It’s gone.’ The look he gave me...” He drew breath through his teeth. “Some looks are like seals. He put one on me. He didn’t say ‘curse.’ He only said: ‘Then one day you will bring me something as heavy as it was.’”

“Something heavy,” I repeated. I thought of the weight

of unseen things: expectations, loyalty, love. “You don’t know what.”

“I only know he is here. Or that his name drifts here. Someone has called him. Someone who wants me to stumble.”

“Adrien?” The name slipped from my mouth before I could test it. It didn’t feel quite right. Not entirely.

Lucien shook his head. “He isn’t the hand. He may be the wind.”

We were silent. Not from embarrassment, but from respect for a silence older than we were. Footsteps struck the planks behind the wall, and someone laughed so brightly it sifted through the gaps. The scent of roasted almonds had followed us into the shadow, sweet and warm, mixing with tar and linseed oil into a fragrance that suddenly held comfort.

“If you want me to leave,” Lucien said, “tonight, before the evening truly begins, then say so. I can leave the harbor before the masks change us. I’m practiced at leaving when music begins.”

“Stay,” I said, so quickly it almost sounded rough. I touched the hand resting on the edge of his mask, feeling the warmth that radiated from his knuckles. “Stay until you’ve told me how heavy a promise can be. Stay until we know if the sea hears us when we speak very quietly.”

He turned his hand, holding my fingers. It wasn’t a firm grip—more an agreement that didn’t wish to press into the skin. “Then I’ll stay.”

I lifted the mask I had been holding by its ribbon. It was wood, painted that “late water” blue, with a thin, almost invisible silver line around the cheeks. I tied it and felt my face change without moving. Lucien smiled—not a sharp smile, but one that let something in me exhale that I

hadn't realized I was holding.

"Come," he said, "dance with me before they forbid us to."

"Who are 'they'?"

"The words," he said, then led me from shadow into light that had grown brighter without the sun offering a reason.

We mingled with the crowd. Hands found hands, shoes found the beat, and the drums pushed us like waves that don't break but only carry. I felt the ground beneath me as something alive; the planks yielded, pressed back, yielded again, as if they knew better than we did how to keep rhythm. The masks—faces of wood, paper, cloth—didn't make people less true, but true in a different way. The laughter spilling through the mouth-slits was muffled and at the same time brighter, as if it had to reach closer to the air to come through.

We danced. I didn't lose my bearings because Lucien held them for us. His hand at my back was both warmth and direction, his breath coming in short bursts when the fiddle quickened the step. In the pauses, no one spoke. In the pauses, I heard the sea. It had not grown louder, but more present, as if it stood a step closer to the planks' edge. I imagined it frowning slightly, pursing its lips the way one does when straining to hear.

When the dance ended, applause broke out—hands clapping, feet stamping wood—and I felt the sound run through my bones. Lucien leaned close. "Later," he said, at my ear. "There's a place they call the 'shadow chamber.' A room behind the sailmaker's. There. When the music returns for the second time."

"How will I know it has 'returned'?" I smiled, though he couldn't see it.

“The fiddle will make the same mistake it did earlier,” he said. “Exactly the same. And everyone will laugh.”

“And you?”

“I’ll leave before they laugh,” he said. “So you’ll follow.”

He released my hand before I could answer, and didn’t vanish but simply slipped from the tight space around me, as if I had never held him, only his shadow. I stayed where I was, breathing, feeling again the gaze—like a hand on my shoulder that didn’t press, didn’t pull, only said: Here. I didn’t turn. Adrien shouldn’t have to read my masked face. I didn’t want his calm to root itself in me.

For a while I let myself drift, danced, laughed, spoke in half-sentences through the slit of my mask. A woman tucked a feather into my ribbon; it was blue, with a black tip. “So you’ll fly faster,” she said, winking as if I were already in the air. I thanked her, the feather scratching lightly at my temple when I nodded. The music struck up again, a light melody hopping over the planks, and somewhere something fell—a bowl, perhaps—clinking in its fall and laying only a small wave alongside the beat.

I waited for the fiddle’s mistake. I waited for Lucien’s disappearance. I waited until waiting was no longer waiting but had become a thin, glittering thread between my fingers. And then both happened at once: the fiddle slipped by the same tiny nuance, the notes briefly stacking over one another, and laughter ran through the crowd like a silver chain. At the same time I saw Lucien at the dancers’ edge turn his head once toward me, without seeking my eyes—he knew where I was—and then veer away, from light into shadow.

I followed. Not hurried—there was no danger to quicken the feet. But not slow either; there was a kind of urgency that parted the air between the people ahead. “Shadow chamber,” I thought, and the syllables carried something

of a secret place in a children's game—something to be whispered, or it would lose its power.

I slipped between two stalls hung with bright cloths—red like pomegranate seeds, green carrying the faint shadow of mussel interiors. The narrow passage between sailmaker and warehouse was cool again, the hemp turning sharp in scent as though freshly cut. My steps softened. Behind me, the music stayed, but it lost sharpness, as if a thin curtain had drawn between us.

“Here,” Lucien said, his voice seeming to come from the wall before I saw him. Then he stood there: mask, shadow, outlines softened where the light refused to decide what was edge and what was air. “One more breath.”

“I have breaths,” I said. “Too many.”

“Then give me one.”

He stepped closer without touching me. Close enough that the feather in my hair might have brushed him if I tilted my head. I didn't. I did nothing. I only let time crumble briefly so it could no longer be measured in seconds but in something that felt heavier. He lifted his hand, and I thought he would touch my mask. But he only traced the edge with a finger, once, the way you run your hand along a shell to feel for any frayed spot.

“Later,” he said again, knowing that near and far can be twins if you look long enough. “I'll speak, and you'll hear me. And then we'll have to decide.”

“We?”

“Yes.” A shadow of a smile. “The debt isn't only mine, if you stay.”

“I didn't come to leave,” I said, and it was the truest thing I'd said in many hours.

Someone stepped into the passage's mouth, and in the sudden slant of light I saw a face I'd have known without a mask: Adrien. He stood still. He said nothing. He measured us not. But the air he brought was colder than ours, and I felt Lucien's shoulder grow subtly harder, as if a thin armor had formed just where my gaze could no longer stroke him.

"They say," Adrien began, his tone friendly yet cutting, "that the wind tonight would rather dance than reconcile. You should be careful it doesn't whirl you apart."

"We're heavier than we look," I answered, and it wasn't defiance. It was a statement I was hearing in myself for the first time.

Adrien stepped closer—not threatening, only deliberate. "Heroine," he said. "I'd like to... speak with you later. When the noise has died down. A short walk. To the chapel square and back."

"Later," I said, and it was not the same "Later" as Lucien's, but it sounded akin.

He nodded. His gaze lingered just a breath too long on my face, as if trying to see how I breathed under the mask. Then he inclined his head, very slightly, toward Lucien. "D'Aubremont."

"Moreau."

Adrien left again. His back was straight, as if carrying something—not an object, but a decision. I watched until the light took him.

"He won't give up," Lucien said, closer now, with no shadow between us. "It's not in his nature."

"And in yours?"

"In mine lies that I don't always grow wise from mistakes. Only stubborn." He opened his hand. "Come. Let's

dance once more. And then—" He stopped. "Then I'll leave before they laugh."

The evening unfurled like a banner. The colors grew deeper, not darker; the red of the cloths took on a blood-warm intensity, the blue of the pennants a light that seemed to come from within. Paper lanterns were lit—round moons swaying in the wind yet not slipping from their hooks. The music was now no longer just a sound over wood; it was a breathing body moving through us, turning us, lifting and setting us down as it pleased. I gave myself to it, not out of carelessness, but because I knew some things can only be understood by going along with them.

We danced again. I lost count of the dances; it was as if the evening had decided numbers didn't suit it. The masks now made sense—they allowed closeness without names, allowed a hand to find another without the need for a look to straighten anything. I felt again and again Lucien's hand steady at my back when a turn grew too quick, and his laughter—real now, if brief—when the fiddle sent the dancers stumbling and the drum caught them again.

In a pause, I drank water from a tin cup. It tasted cool, with a trace of lemon. I saw Adrien speaking with an older man whose hat brim sat low over his face. The man gestured passionately, his hands deserving masks of their own for the stories they told. Adrien listened in stillness, then set his hand on the man's forearm—a gesture both polite and binding. I looked away. I didn't want to arrange words in my mind that might arrange themselves on their own if I left them alone.

"Are you here?" Lucien asked, and I realized I had stopped breathing beneath my mask for a moment. "You were far away."

“I was at the edge of the waves,” I said. “I saw them come and go and didn’t know if I should step in.”

“You’re already wet,” he said, and I smiled without meaning to.

The fiddle’s wrong note slid like a narrow tear through the smooth dress of the music. Laughter bubbled up; I saw heads turn toward one another, fingertips lift as if to feel the mistake again. I turned, but Lucien was already gone from my side. I knew he wasn’t far. One can feel nearness like warmth through cloth.

I went. Where cloth walls turned to bare ones, where the smell of sugar gave way again to the stronger note of hemp, my steps slowed, and I heard that the harbor still had sounds beyond the music: metal striking metal, a hoarse curse, the sharp laugh of a boy who had stolen an olive from a stall. There was always life outside the festival—a reminder that joy was not an obligation but a right.

The shadow chamber received me as if it knew I belonged to it. I stepped in, leaning my back against the cool wall until my breath was mine again. Then Lucien came. He moved with the quiet certainty of men going to places where they had once waited—long, perhaps in vain—and yet had not grown weary. He stopped so that the gap between us was exactly as wide as it needed to be to carry words.

“So,” I said. “Now.”

He nodded. “Now.” He removed the mask. The imprint of its ribbon lay briefly like a shadow across his forehead. “The promise wasn’t a bargain,” he began. “It wasn’t smuggling, as they say. It was...” He searched for a word and found none. “It was trust. I lost it. Not because I was dishonorable. Because the storm came, as storms do. Wrong. I’ve waited too often since then to hear someone

call me back to where I lost it. Today—" He laughed without humor. "Today, someone calls. But not so I can make it right. So I can fall."

"Who?"

"His son," Lucien said. "Or someone who calls himself that. The one the trust belonged to is long gone. But his name lies in this town like a coin pressed into the pavement. You catch your toe on it, and there's a story."

"And you?"

"I'm the one meant to stumble." He stepped a half-pace closer. "I'm tired of stumbling."

"Then walk straight," I said softly. "Tonight. In front of everyone. Dance as if there were no whispers. And if they address you, say: 'Yes.' Say: 'Yes, I lost it.' And say: 'I carry it.' Some curses dissolve when you name them."

He looked at me, and his gaze was neither thanks nor surprise. It was something of its own—an acknowledgment that made my feet feel more firmly set beneath me. "And you?" he asked. "Will you carry with me?"

"I'll carry what I can," I answered. "Not out of duty. Out of choice."

From outside came an excited shouting, followed by the shuffle of many feet. The sound was different from that of dancing—more hurried, uneven. Lucien and I looked at each other, then stepped together to the frame of the shadow chamber, far enough to see the opening without filling it.

On the square before the sailmaker's shop, a half-circle had formed. At its center stood two men I recognized from afar: one with a coat fraying at the hem, the other with his hat pulled low. The hat-man spoke loudly; his

words were not finely cut, but they bit because they meant what they said. "...and I say he's a man who eats the trust of others and then claims he's only had a hunger for salt! Let him speak! Let him tell us all who he owes—and what!"

A murmur rippled through the crowd. It was not one-sided. Some nodded; others shook their heads; still others simply looked between faces as if between the two sides of a coin they could not catch.

Adrien stood at the edge—not in the first row, but not held back either. He did not nod. He did not shake his head. He was there, and his presence gave the moment weight. I felt a brief, narrow pain—not toward Lucien, not toward Adrien, but toward all that we cannot repair and can only carry.

Lucien set a hand to my elbow. "I'll go out," he said calmly.

"I'll come with you."

"No." He shook his head barely. "Not now. Not when they're throwing words. You..." A trace of warmth lay on his next breath. "You're not their target. Not yet. Stay my ground."

I stayed. Not gladly. Not out of fear. I stayed because he asked, and because I knew sometimes you do more by not doing. Lucien stepped out—not into the light, for the lanterns had turned the square into a doubtful gold—but into the middle of a circle that was no dance. He held the mask in his hand, not to his face. He lifted it slightly, as if showing a sign. And he spoke. His voice was not loud, yet it reached every edge.

"You want me to say what I owe," he began. "I owe no gold. I owe no blood. I owe a promise I did not keep. Because the sea took what I meant to carry. I did not lose

it from cowardice. I did not steal it from greed. I lost it because I am a man beneath wind and water.”

A murmur. No outcry. No cheer. The word “man” carried weight here, for the sea often reminds us how small we are.

“To whom?” someone called. “To whom do you owe this promise?”

Lucien gave no name. He only lifted the mask. “To the one who awaited it. He is gone. But his name is here. I will go when he calls me to give what I can. I will stay, if you let me, until the call comes.”

“Empty words!” shouted the hat-man. “Empty wood!” He pointed at the mask as though it proved something I did not understand.

“Wood is not empty,” Lucien said quietly. “Wood carries ships.”

A narrow laugh tore at one edge of the circle. It was not friendly. I saw Adrien turn his head to the hat-man. Not for long—only long enough to tie a rope to a cleat. The hat-man raised his hands in a placating gesture, but too late to hide that he had felt the look.

“Enough!” a woman called. Her voice was firm. “It’s festival. We dance. If you want judgment, come back tomorrow when the wind has settled.”

That was Marenveil, I thought. We did not mind judging. But we seldom did it when the music was playing. Someone raised the fiddle. A note leapt. Another. Hesitant, as if testing whether the air would hold it. Then the drums came back, as if this had been only a pause.

Lucien stepped back—not yet to me. He lingered at the edge, and I saw two, three people briefly touch his shoulder. Not much. Just enough. The hat-man retreated.

The hem of his coat brushed the planks, and he threw up his hand as though shaking something from the air that clung to him. Adrien stood a moment longer than he had to. Then he, too, left. His walk was calm. But he went in the direction the wind was coming from.

Lucien came to me, and my knees did not go weak. They only became very aware. "Thank you for staying," he said.

"I don't like being ground," I replied. "I prefer to be current."

"Tonight you must be both."

We stepped back into the shadow chamber, on the threshold of noise, and it was as if we had crossed a sill that told us both: You know what you're doing. I felt the darkness with my hands, it was that thick, and the wall took my back like a promise.

"It will laugh again," Lucien said. "The fiddle will make the same mistake again. And then..." His gaze dropped to my lips—not boldly, not shyly. More like something lying in the path, and you wonder if it's lucky to pick it up.

"And then?" My voice was barely a breath.

"Then we go," he said. "There." He nodded deeper into the shadows, where I saw a doorway, hardly darker than the darkness around it. "A room with no windows. A closeness that doesn't hurt. They call it the true shadow chamber."

"How fitting," I murmured. I thought of Adrien, of his word about the shore. Of what he saw for both of us. I thought of the hat-man and his hands. Of the laughter that cuts. I thought of the promise Lucien had lost, and the name he would not speak. I thought of myself, on the shore of my own choices.

Outside, the music built a step on which we both stood without moving. I heard the wind threading differently through the pennants now—not stronger, only more decided, as if it were no longer a guest in this town but its host. I looked at Lucien. His eyes had not grown darker in the dimness; rather, they had taken on something of the color the women called “late water.” His hand found my forearm, a touch so light it was more appointment than possession.

“If we leave now,” he said, “the night won’t end. It will only grow quieter.”

“You hear quiet things better,” I replied.

Then it happened: the fiddle outside stumbled over the same little step as before, the note tipping in exactly the same way, and the laughter came—brighter than before, because a beloved mistake is always received more fondly. Lucien lifted his head like someone who had received the signal he could trust. “Now,” he said, and in his “Now” there was no hurry, only clarity.

We stepped deeper into the passage. The shadows thickened, but not unfriendly; they were more like a cloak drawn around you when the skin is still warm from the sun. The air smelled of hemp and of the ghost of a spice whose name I did not know. My fingers found the back of his hand, and in the darkness it was as if we had confirmed something that had already been true. He led me to the door that was no door, only an opening that disliked light. The wood beyond was smooth, as though many hands had run along it.

“One more step,” he said. “Then we’re in the room where music is only distance. And the wind a sentence you can read over and over.”

“And then?” I asked. I knew the answer. But some questions must be asked so the answers lie exactly where

they belong.

“Then,” he said, his breath brushing the wood so close to my face I felt it on my lips, “we won’t hide behind wood. Only behind ourselves.”

I stepped. The shadow chamber took us in. Outside, the music swelled, and somewhere far above the bay a first roll of thunder sounded—so distant it was more like a memory than a threat. It was not strong. Only a promise that the sky knew what we were doing below. I raised my hand, seeking blindly, found fabric—his coat—found skin—his cheek—and felt the wind outside turn: a subtle, barely audible shift that could reorder everything.

“Lucien,” I said, and my name in his mouth was no longer far, but very near, a small sound that could precede the greatest.

He drew me into the shadowed corner so that the light behind him traced a fine line along the edge of his mask, still in his hand. I lifted my face, he lowered his, and I knew that in the next breath the festival outside would go on, with colors, masks, and dances, and that inside, in this closeness, something would begin that knew neither closeness nor distance.

Outside, the town danced. Inside, a sentence without a period waited. And the thunder rolled, softly, over the coast.

While outside laughter skipped bright through the alleys and the music lapped against the posts like a long, warm wave, we slipped further back into the shadow chamber. Behind us the wood whispered; before us there was only our breath. As Lucien’s hand found my neck and my mask slid beneath his fingers, the wind at the bay turned—a barely heard tilt that set the pennants to a new alignment—and I let his lips find me while outside the drums reset the beat.



Chapter 12 **The Festival of the Wind**



The wood of the shadow chamber breathed softly, as if it had harbored our secrets many times before and knew that the most important things are not meant to be spoken aloud. Outside, the town laughed, the drums started anew, and I heard how the fiddle made its beloved mistake once more, as if it wanted to give us a sign. The wind shifted in the bay, so gently that the pennants only turned a few fingers' breadth; and in that tiny change lay everything I would later tell and yet could only feel now.

Lucien's hand found my neck, the mask in his other hand was nothing but a weight that no longer mattered. When his lips sought mine, the entire noise of the festival pulled back like a curtain behind us, and what remained was the

salt breath he brought in with him and the quiet, firm will with which he drew me closer. I tasted the night on his tongue and something bitter, like the edge of an old promise. I opened to him, not hastily, but without hesitation, and I felt my heart knocking against my ribs, at first irregular, then in a rhythm that answered his.

„Heroine,“ he murmured, and the way he said my name made me softer than any warmth could. I placed my hands on his cheekbones, felt the fine stubble of the skin the mask had spared, and the slight tremor at his temple that was no tremor at all, but an insistent, living wanting. Outside, someone called, the call swallowed by laughter, and I thought the town would protect us tonight by not paying us any attention.

„Stay with me,“ I said against his mouth, and he did not answer with words but with a breath that slid down my throat and settled in my chest. His fingers moved along my shoulder blades, as if asking each place whether it knew him; the silk of my shawl gave a barely audible rustle, a very quiet yes. I pulled him closer so that his hip touched mine, and the mask bumped against my chin, as if it wanted to complain that it was not invited. I took it from him, hooked it on a nail in the wall, and the mask swayed until it came to rest.

„I promised you,“ he said hoarsely.

„Whom?“ I asked, though I didn't want to know it, only to hear it.

„The night,“ he said, „and myself. And you, without being allowed to.“

He kissed me again, deeper, surer, and I let him have more than I thought I still had to give. My hand found his neck, the tendons standing in fine lines beneath the skin, the pulse beating against my thumb. The world smelled of hemp, tar, and the caramel-sweet remains of almonds

that somewhere farther outside had just fallen from the pan. He pulled away a fraction, just enough for me to repeat my breath, and laid his forehead against mine. „If I leave—if I must leave—“

„Not today,“ I said, and it sounded like a command, but it was a plea that knew no weakness. „Not today.“

He nodded so lightly that my lashes felt the breath of his movement. „Then later,“ he said. „Later I will go the path I must go. But today—“

„—today you go with me,“ I finished. „Where the wind can see who we are.“

„To the cliffs?“ In his gaze was something that both shied away and longed.

„There,“ I said, and the wind slipping between the boards answered with a barely audible whistle, as if it had remembered our decision.

We stepped out of the shadow chamber, paused for a heartbeat in the dark mouth of the corridor, and the music flew toward us like a startled swarm. The lanterns hummed in their wires, the colors of the cloths now glowed as if they carried the light within themselves. Masks moved like independent faces through the crowd—a fox mask whose black-yellow eyes briefly seemed real in the dance; a seagull with a beak too large, waddling past a bowl of olives in laughter; a simple oval, in mother-of-pearl, that I recognized instantly. Adrien stood behind it, his head tilted slightly to the side. His gaze met mine; he did nothing, not even nod, and precisely for that reason there was a decision in his face, as thin as a blade’s edge.

Lucien placed his hand on my elbow. „Come,“ he said quietly, „before the wind changes its mind.“

We did not hurry, but we moved with intent, threading

between dance and laughter. Shoulders brushed us, hands, feathers; once a blue feather—almost the color of late water—caught on my headband, and a woman called to me: „For luck!“ before she vanished back into the circle. A boy jumped over a rope two children were holding taut, and the drums counted him the swing. The fiddle began a song I knew, with a small stumble in the second bar—tonight the whole town loved its mistakes.

We left behind the smell of sugar and fried fish, turned past the chapel into the narrower lane where the stone was already cooler. The air grew clearer, damper, and the sound of the sea came closer, first like a conversation behind a door, then like voices in the same room. Lucien took a step ahead, then let me go first, as if in this town and in this night I were his compass. „It’s pulling,“ he said, and I didn’t know if he meant the wind or something working under his skin.

„It’s calling,“ I said. „But not me.“

He was silent. In his silence lay a caution that had nothing of cowardice. I saw the darker line his mouth drew when he didn’t speak. The path rose slightly, the houses drew apart, and the town lost its ceiling. The bay lay there, half light, half shadow, the pennants now stood at a sharper angle, and beyond the tongue of the pier I saw how the sea raised a flat back that could do more than breathe.

„It will rain later,“ I said.

„Yes,“ he said. „And later still there will be thunder.“

„For us?“

„No. For everyone,“ he said, and yet beneath the word I heard a quiet: also for us.

We walked on, past the last gardens, on whose fences shells hung that flickered like small moons in the dusk. A half-wild cat ran along the wall with us as if unwilling to

let it break off. „When I’m silent,“ Lucien said after a while, „I’m not silent toward you, but toward myself. That’s the only difference that matters.“

„I know,“ I said, and I truly did know it, the way one knows the taste of salt without having to explain it.

When we reached the path to the cliffs, the music of the town had gained a distance that did not make it quieter, only softer, like a memory one can still smell. The narrow stair cut into the rock was damp and smelled of iodine and of the iron you keep on your hands when you’ve touched a rusty nail. I lifted the hem of my dress, and Lucien’s hand brushed my knee briefly, a small help that was more than that. I set my foot carefully, and the cold of the stone climbed up into my ankles.

Above lay the edge of the world. The wind came from the east, slid under my clothes, lifted them gently and laid them down again, as if measuring them. The sky was not yet black, it was deep, with a thin gray light hanging from the clouds like damp silk. The sea was no longer a smooth animal, but one that raised its shoulders and played its muscles. In the west lay a strip shimmering greenish, as if another sea had been set alight in the distance.

„It’s beautiful,“ I said, and I wondered at the word; it did not fit and yet it did.

„Beautiful is a dangerous word,“ Lucien said. „It softens the edge.“

„And you?“ I stepped closer to the cliff’s edge, just enough so the spray, when it rose, could kiss my face. „Does edge make you more honest or harder?“

„Both,“ he said, and he stayed one step behind me before catching up so that our shoulders almost touched. „I’m more honest when I know what’s beneath me. And

harder when it wants me.“

„Does it want you?“ I spoke the word calmly, as if it were not dangerous to grant a will to water.

He tilted his head slightly back, as if listening into the wind, not with his ears but with something inside himself that I did not yet know. „More today than usual.“

I held on to him, not with my hands, but with the certainty that stood between us like a staff. The first fine spray came, barely more than skin. The drops smelled of stone. In the crevices of the rocks lay water that quivered when the wind caught it. I thought of the shadow chamber and the kiss still so near that I carried it on my mouth. And I thought that closeness and edge do not exclude each other if one wants both.

„Stay with me,“ I said, and this time it was neither a command nor a plea, but a statement that divided the evening into two halves.

„I’m trying,“ he said. „Against everything that calls me.“

The wind grew bolder the longer we stood there. It curled into our hair, tugged at the hems of our clothes, and pressed the salt of the sea against our lips as though it wanted to taste what we might say. The water below no longer lapped but struck, short and hard, against the black rock, each impact crowned with a moment of luminous spray that seemed to glow before it fell away. There was a rhythm in it, not unlike the drums we had left behind in the square, but heavier, slower, a music made for something older than dancing.

Lucien stepped forward, not much, but enough to put one of his boots on the darker part of the stone where the spray had made a sheen. “It smells different here,” he said, looking down into the restless gray below.

“It smells like what it’s hiding,” I answered. “Things we

can't name without losing them."

He smiled faintly, though it didn't reach his eyes. "And yet you name them anyway."

"Because if I don't, the wind will do it for me." My voice was steady, but there was a tug low in my chest, like the pull of a rope tied to something I could not see.

A sudden swell hit the cliff harder than the others. The spray rose high, bright against the deepening dusk, and a chill ran through me—not from the cold, but from the way the water seemed to aim for him. It was only water, I told myself, but the thought rang hollow.

Lucien took another half-step toward the edge. "It's calling louder," he murmured.

"Don't answer," I said at once.

"Sometimes you don't have a choice." His words were quiet, but they cut through the wind.

"You do tonight." I reached for his arm then, my fingers catching the fabric of his sleeve. The cloth was already damp, cool against my skin.

Another wave hit. The stone beneath his boot gleamed slick and treacherous. I saw him shift his weight, but the movement was wrong—too quick, too unbalanced. His boot slid.

"Lucien!" I caught his arm with both hands as he pitched forward, my nails digging through the wet fabric into the muscle beneath. The pull on my shoulders was sudden and brutal; the weight of him yanked me toward the drop, and for a heartbeat I felt the cliff's breath beneath my soles.

His other hand slapped against the rock, fingers splayed, finding a crack no wider than a coin. The muscles in his forearm went taut under my grip, a living rope straining

to hold. Salt spray stung my eyes, and the roar of the water was so loud now that it felt inside my bones.

“Don’t—move—” My words broke with the wind.

He laughed once, sharp and breathless. “I’m not planning to—” His voice cut off as the stone shifted beneath his boot, grinding wetly.

I leaned back with all my weight, anchoring us both to the higher ground. My knees bit into the rock; the stone scraped through my stockings. “I have you,” I said, though my own heartbeat told me how near the lie was to truth.

The sea struck again, harder, the spray flaring white in the half-light. In that moment, I saw it—down between the cliffs, in the hollow where the waves clawed at the stone. A glow. Pale, cold, not like lantern-light or moonlight, but as though the water itself was lit from inside by something that had no name. It pulsed, once, and the pulse seemed to reach through the spray toward Lucien’s legs.

He saw it too. I felt his body tighten under my hands, not from fear but from recognition.

“It wants me,” he said.

“No.” My voice was iron in my mouth. “You’re not going.”

“It always—”

“Not—tonight.” I dragged on his arm, my nails cutting deeper into the cloth. His shoulder shifted, and with a harsh pull and the grinding of his boot against wet stone, he came back toward me. His breath broke in my ear as he steadied himself, the weight of him pressing against my front until we both stood fully on the drier rock.

For a moment, neither of us moved. The sea snarled

below, frustrated, the glow gone as quickly as it had come. The wind whipped my hair across my mouth, and I bit down on the strands just to taste something that wasn't salt.

Lucien's hands came up to my shoulders. They were shaking—not from weakness, but from the force it took to stand against something that had tried to pull him under. "You shouldn't have—" he began.

"Yes, I should." My fingers were still curled in the damp cloth of his sleeve. "And I will again."

His gaze searched my face as though the wind might steal it if he looked away. "You're hurt," he said.

"Only my knees." The sting of the rock was already seeping into me, a small price. "You'd have been—" I stopped. The words would have put shape to what I didn't want to imagine.

"I wasn't going to let it," he said, though the way his voice wrapped around the word 'it' made me think the sea had its own ideas.

We stood like that for another breath, the wind pressing against our sides as if trying to feel where we joined. Then Lucien turned us away from the edge, guiding me with a hand at my back.

As we stepped away, I felt the ground change beneath my feet—the rock giving way to a path of packed earth, then to the first loose stones that led back toward the town. But the sound of the sea stayed with me, lodged in my ribs, a rhythm I knew I'd hear again.

The path curved inland for a moment, sheltered from the full force of the wind by the rise of the cliff itself. In the half-shadow, the night seemed gentler, but I could still feel the pull of the sea behind us like a hand that had not quite released its grip. Lucien walked beside me, his coat

damp and heavy, his breath still uneven. I did not ask him what he had seen in the glow. I knew enough from the way his eyes kept drifting toward the sound of the waves, as though he feared — or hoped — they might speak again.

We passed the old signal post, its wooden frame creaking in the wind. The ropes slapped against the mast, a sound sharp enough to make me flinch. Lucien reached out briefly, his fingers brushing mine in the dark. “You’re cold,” he murmured.

“I’m holding on,” I said.

“To me?” His voice held something raw.

“To the ground,” I answered, though we both knew I meant more than that.

The lane dipped, and we came to a flat stretch where the earth turned to wet sand. The tide had left a lace of foam at its edge, each thread vanishing as the water breathed in and out. Lantern-light from the far-off harbor flickered on the ripples, making the surface seem to wink — not in welcome, but in secret. The glow from before was gone, but I could still feel its afterimage in my chest, as though it had left a mark there.

Lucien stopped. The wind caught at his hair, lifting it from his forehead. “I thought,” he said slowly, “that it might let me go this time.”

“But it didn’t,” I said.

His gaze met mine, and in it was both the weight of survival and the shadow of longing. “It never will. Not until—” He broke off, shaking his head.

“Then we don’t give it the chance,” I said. My voice was steadier than I felt.

He smiled faintly, though the curve of his mouth carried

no joy. “You speak as though the sea listens.”

“Sometimes it does,” I said. “And sometimes it listens just enough to pretend it hasn’t heard.”

The wind shifted again, sharper now, as if slicing through our words. Overhead, the clouds had thickened, their bellies bruised with the color of rain not yet fallen. A gull screamed somewhere beyond sight, the cry torn and high. I thought of the festival we had left behind — the drums, the dancing, the fox-mask’s quick glint — and it seemed impossibly far away, as though it belonged to another night entirely.

We reached the rise that led back to the first of the town’s houses. Their windows glowed with amber light, and the smell of woodsmoke drifted out to meet us. I should have felt relief in the sight, but instead there was a strange ache in my throat, a knowledge that the sea could follow us even here if it chose.

Lucien paused at the threshold of the first narrow street. “You saved me,” he said simply.

“You held on,” I countered.

“Only because you made me,” he said. His hand came to rest against my jaw for the briefest moment, rough and warm from the cold. Then he let it fall.

The street swallowed us in its close warmth. Shadows shifted on the cobbles as we passed, the lanterns swaying in their iron brackets. Somewhere, faintly, I could hear the festival music still drifting up the lanes, thin and distant. But beneath it, or perhaps behind it, there was another rhythm — slower, deeper. The sound of the waves. Even here.

Lucien walked a step ahead now, his shoulders squared as though bracing against something neither of us could see. I watched the damp dark of his coat, the way the wind

tugged at its edges. My fingers still remembered the shape of his arm under the cloth, the strain of pulling him back, the knowledge that for a heartbeat he had been more sea than man.

The closer we came to the square, the louder the music grew again. The colors of the banners were muted in the night, but the masks still moved like dreams given form. Laughter spilled across the stones, wrapping itself around us. It felt strange, stepping back into it, carrying the salt and the edge of the cliff in our lungs.

We didn't join the dancers. Instead, we lingered at the edge, watching as the festival turned, unbroken, around its own center. The air was warm here, heavy with the scent of spiced wine and the sweetness of roasted nuts. Somewhere, a bell rang the hour, and the wind answered with a low, sustained breath that slid through the square like a warning only we could hear.

Lucien glanced toward the harbor. I followed his gaze, but saw only the faint glimmer of masts and the restless dark beyond. No glow. No shape. Just the memory of the pull.

"Tomorrow," he said quietly, "the wind will be different."

"It always is," I replied.

He looked at me then, a long, steady look, and I thought he might say more. But instead, he took my hand — just for a moment — and then let it go, as if to prove he could.

That night, long after the festival had faded into the alleys and the drums lay quiet, I woke to the sound of the wind shifting again. It was no longer the voice of celebration but of something older, darker. The air smelled of rain and of the deep, cold places beneath the waves. In the distance, a low rumble rolled in from the west, and I

knew before I rose from my bed that the cliff would not be silent tomorrow — and that the sea would come for him again.



Chapter 13

Thunder over the Cliff



The first thunder wasn't a strike, but a groan – a long, drawn-out, deep upheaval, as if the sky itself had taken a breath and didn't know whether it meant to give it back to us. The wind smelled of iron and wet seaweed, of something familiar and something I couldn't name, and yet it pushed at me from the inside, like an invisible hand against my breastbone. I stood with Lucien at the cliff's edge, my dress heavy from the spray, hair in strands lashing my cheeks, and felt the air tug at us – petulant as a child and relentless as a force you don't name if you want to sleep at night.

„Don't go closer,“ I said, though he hadn't taken a single step. My voice was quieter than I intended, frayed by the

wind like wet paper.

Lucien didn't smile. It was that expression he sometimes wore when he was listening – as if he wasn't hearing me at all, but something speaking through me to him. His eyes, dark and deep like the waters below us, glimmered in the unsteady light the lighthouse cast over the sea. The light seemed to limp, as if the tower itself struggled to stay upright, and its beam stumbled like a drunkard across the foam-crests of the waves.

„It calls,“ he said, and the word was no excuse, no pose. It sounded like a statement of the inevitable.

„Then don't listen.“

He lowered his gaze, as though he could lay my request down like a chain at his feet. But the sea beneath us was no longer a surface, no mirror for light or scraps of moon. It was flesh and breath, a body at war with itself. The waves lashed the rocks, burst into white blossoms that instantly collapsed back into darkness, and deep down, where the water's colour shifted into something heavier – to lead and night – something glowed. An uncanny light, as if a candle were rising from the belly of the sea, a candle meant to stand on no table.

I felt my fingers reach for his sleeve. The fabric was soaked, cold, heavy. „Lucien,“ I said, and the sea said my name, but differently, softer, and I didn't know whether I imagined it because I was too focused on his voice, or whether the storm truly shaped words.

He stood one step too close to the edge. Every breath of wind moved him in the balance of an answer neither of us wanted to give. I saw the water below pulling in a direction that didn't match the storm's, as if a second, hidden breath had seized the sea and was tugging on a thread that ended exactly where Lucien stood.

„You don't belong there,“ I whispered. I knew he heard me, despite the howling wind, despite the thunder tearing the sky in layers. „Not anymore.“

He closed his eyes, and a drop slid from his lashes, as if something inside him were weeping that was not him. „I promised,“ he said hoarsely, „and debts don't dissolve in the rain.“

„Then let them burn. Let them dissolve in salt.“

A short, sharp flash split the night open. For a moment I saw every blade of grass, every groove in the rock, the fine lines of his lips, the scar at his neck, thin as a trail drawn in silver. I also saw something else: movement, a bend in the path further up, where the track from the village climbed toward us. A shadow that froze when the lightning died. I thought of Adrien. Of his way of not asking and still knowing everything; of that gaze that sometimes felt too cold to deflect.

„Come,“ I said, more to myself than to him. I pulled, but the sea pulled harder. It was as though the waves had grown fingers – thin but many – that wrapped first around the air and then around Lucien. He made the mistake of looking forward, as if one could bargain with the sea by meeting its eyes. The spray leapt at us like a pack of beasts, biting with a thousand small teeth at cloth, at skin, at breath, and I tasted the salt that I knew would stay with me for hours, on my tongue, in my throat, as though I carried a piece of the sea inside me.

„Stop,“ I said to the water, softly, absurdly – but it was more honest than pretending I was facing only the wind. „Give him to me.“

The light in the depths pulsed. It rose neither up nor down, but hovered, as though waiting – restrained, watchful, patient. I remembered the night in the cave – the heat of his hands, the shiver in the air that hadn't

come from us alone. I remembered his word: debt. A curse, almost, or a contract signed when the world was still another place, and you thought you could bow to everything without losing yourself.

„I'll break it,“ I said. I didn't know whether my voice was out loud or only thought, but the words settled in me like small stones, ordering something that was threatening to scatter.

The wind rose. It had given up playing. Now it shoved us, roughly, without detours, and the rain behaved as if it meant to wash us until nothing remained to hold on to. I heard a call from the path – perhaps my name, perhaps only a sound that belonged to no language. I didn't turn. My whole gaze, my whole body, was fixed on Lucien. His weight was no longer safe. One foot searched for hold, found only the slick edge. „Don't,“ I said, and my heart was already at the place where he would fall, as if I could fill the depths with my body.

He turned his head, and in that moment, when his eyes found mine, the sea stopped pulling – for a single heartbeat. I saw him – not as one you are allowed to desire, but as one being called back from a boundary you never wanted, but know because you have walked its edge night after night. „Stay,“ I said.

The sea tugged again at the edge. Something beneath the surface – a current that didn't match the storm – shot outward like a muscle spasm, and the rock under Lucien's boot gave way as if it were made of paper. His body tilted – not as in falling, but as in stepping through a door that had been opened and was calling him.

I reached for him. I knew I was too late.

The thunder crushed the next moment flat, like a coin someone lays on the tongue and says: taste. The uncanny light below flared, and I saw – no, I felt – it reach for

him.

My hand found his arm.

Time buckled, like a wet branch. Everything that came after is a sequence of small images, sharp as splinters.

The fabric under my fingers: coarse, soaked, cold.

His arm: tendons suddenly hard, like tightened wires.

My grip: too narrow, too weak, and yet the only thing between him and the maw.

The cry I didn't hear – the wind swallowed it – but I saw it, a tremor running through his throat.

„Lucien!“ I said, and the sea said: No.

I braced myself backwards, my heels searching for purchase, finding a root that jutted from the earth, stubborn like a finger saying: Here. My dress tore – a sound like short laughter, senseless – and the rain stamped into my face as if to reprimand me. I pulled, and he slid. Spray leapt over us, salt burned in a cut on the back of my hand I hadn't noticed. For a moment I saw his lips move. „It wants me,“ they shaped. I shook my head, though he might not have seen it.

„You are not it,“ I forced out. I didn't know if it was truth or an incantation. Inside me a fury rose I had never felt before; it had nothing to do with please-pull-me-up. It was fury at the sea, at the pulling, the claiming – as if he were an object, a signed coin, a pawnstone in a hand that wasn't mine.

„Not today,“ I said. „Not away from me.“

I dug my fingers deeper. My nails pierced the wet fabric, found skin, slid over muscles that worked beneath my hands – desperate, but deliberate. A gust struck us from the side. It smelled of algae, of something metallic, of storm. Lucien's body was half over the edge, his legs searching the rock that had no foothold left, and I felt his

weight anchoring to my grip. That heavy, hot reality you cannot postpone: I am holding a human being.

He wasn't just heavy, not just wet and real. He was Lucien – and the fact that it was him changed my strength into something else. A strength that didn't come from my arms. It crawled from my back, from my belly, from a past that wasn't even mine, and it said: You will not let him go.

Below us the light pulsed again, closer. It had a colour I could not name – something between green and white, but older than both. I had the feeling it knew our names, and the feeling it disliked names. Waves struck the rock-ledge beneath us, and in their foam I saw for a moment something that looked like a hand – too many fingers, too few. I could have screamed, from disgust, from fear, but both needed breath, and the wind had claimed all of it.

„Let go,“ Lucien whispered, and I knew he wasn't speaking to me.

„She's right,“ I said aloud, and I didn't know who I meant – the sea, the wind, the light burning in my eyes. „Listen to her.“

He looked up at me. His pupils were wide, the rims of their black glistened where raindrops clung. For one heartbeat the storm around us wasn't an enemy, but a stage of noise against which our silence grew louder. I leaned forward, so far that my hair clung to his face, my breath brushed his ear.

„Breathe with me,“ I said. „Not with her.“

He did. That was the miracle. Not that the rock held. Not that my fingers didn't slip. The miracle was that he took my words like a plank in the water. I felt his body change – not lighter, not heavier, but more decided. He drew up his knees, found an edge of stone that hadn't been there,

yet now was, and I didn't question it. He braced himself, the way one does before a jump, and I pulled – not like pulling on something that doesn't want to return, but like leading a dance partner who knows the step yet has forgotten the rhythm.

The wind shrieked. A squall whipped us to our knees. I nearly fell, caught myself, pain shooting hot up my wrist, but I kept hold of him. „More,“ I gasped.

He came up a little. A low groan – his, or mine, or the earth's – I didn't know. My hands burned, as if the salt the rain washed into my skin had blessed and cursed them at once. I felt his warmth now – not the heat of fever, but of life. I felt his trembling, fine and involuntary, telling more than any word. Fear, yes. And something else: shame, perhaps. Anger. Longing. I held all of it.

„I promised her,“ he whispered into my sleeve. The storm tore the syllable in half, but I heard it. „Years ago. Before—“

„I know,“ I said, though I didn't. „But you can promise again. Today. Here. To me.“

At that he faltered. His hands found the rim, fingers clawing, knuckles whitening as if he were pressing the colour out of himself. He was here – wholly here – and the sea still pulled, but it no longer had us. Not in the way it had.

„Say it,“ I said, and it sounded more like a plea than a command. „To me.“

He lifted his head. Our faces were close – so close that the rain from his cheek leapt onto mine, as if we were only two sides of the same place. „I promise...“ He closed his eyes briefly, as though he had to set the word on his tongue before giving it to the wind. „... not to leave, if you don't want me to.“

It wasn't a hero's vow, not a line fit for a banner. It was narrow, and in that narrowness true. I nodded, and the relief that flooded me was not the kind you clear with a single breath. It ran deeper, into the corners where fear had settled, and loosened it there – slowly, thoroughly, like warm water embracing something cold.

„Now,“ I said, „come.“

We made it together – his pull, my tug. The rock gave a sulky jolt, as if offended, and I fell back to my knees, dragging him with me. For a moment we lay on the ground, flat, filthy, soaked, and the world above us was a howling and a flickering. The lighthouse cast its limping eye over us, and I thought it had counted us, and would count again just to be sure.

Lucien turned to me. His face was lighter now – not because the storm had eased, but because something in him had stepped back from the edge. He lifted his hand, hesitant, as if touch now was a price greater than anything, and brushed my hair from my face. His fingers trembled. I laid mine over his. They were cold, and I wanted to give them warmth – not the kind that comes from skin on skin, but the kind that says: Here. You.

„Heroine,“ he said.

That he said my name was more than sound. It was return. It was as though the sea had borrowed him and given him back to me to see what I would do with it.

From the path came a clink, as if someone stumbled against a stone. I turned sharply. A figure stood there, only a blur in the rain, cloak whipping, and when lightning ignited the sky, I saw his profile clear: Adrien. He didn't look like a man lost. He looked like one who stood there because he understood he was too late.

I raised my hand, but the wind stole the gesture. Adrien

didn't move. He watched, and his eyes were dark. Not hard – that would have been easier. Just dark, like water into which someone has dropped a bead of ink. I felt a pang – needless, unfair, but true. Then Adrien turned slightly, as if to leave, and nothing but the thunder accompanied him.

„We have to get away from the edge,“ I said, and my voice was mine again. „Come.“

We crawled, stumbled, stood, fell again. Only a few metres, yet a stretch that felt like a small lifetime. The storm drove us, but it carried us too, like one who scolds and at the same time holds out an arm so you won't fall. A hollow in the rock, with heather clinging and scratching, gave us the meagre shelter of an arm hung out of a window. We crouched inside, backs to stone, shoulder to shoulder.

„Show me your hands,“ I said. I needed to touch him, I needed to count if he was whole. His palms were raw, the skin torn in one place, salt having settled in like a guest unwilling to leave. I bound my scarf around them – a pitiful bandage, wet and cold, but it was mine, and that counted more than dry cloth.

Lucien watched me, serious, as if learning something precious and fearing he might forget it. „You're shaking,“ he said quietly.

„I'm cold.“ I smiled. „And I've never been good at watching you fall.“

He laughed – a short sound, splintered between rock and storm, yet it found its way back into my chest. „I'm still here,“ he said.

„Yes,“ I said – a prayer and an inventory at once.

Below us, somewhere deeper, the light pulsed again – as if it had clenched its teeth.

The rain grew finer, but no less. It was like dust made of water, covering everything without weight, and yet the world looked as though seen through milk. The wind still drove at us, but it had taken the fury out of its face and kept only the cold resolve. I sat close to Lucien, our knees touching, and that small touch was a dam against what had been tugging at us only moments ago. My hands rested in his lap – not by calculation, but because they belonged there, at least for now.

„He followed you,“ Lucien said after a while. He meant Adrien. His voice wasn't mocking, wasn't bitter. Just a statement, placed gently between two gusts.

„Maybe he followed the storm,“ I replied. „Maybe you. Maybe me.“

„Maybe all of us,“ he said, and lifted his gaze as if he might see the man again on the path – which he couldn't, and neither could I. Adrien was gone, as people vanish when they know an entrance is mistimed, but that there must be a second.

We fell silent. I heard the sea speaking, and I didn't like it. Not tonight. It spoke not in waves, but in demands – in claims that weren't mine and yet resonated in my body because Lucien sat so close beside me. I thought of his words – I promised her – and of the way he'd said them, not defiant, not broken, but like someone holding a thread that tied into something bigger at both ends.

„To whom?“ I asked, my voice softer than the wind, and yet it reached him. „To whom did you promise?“

He didn't smile, but his features softened, as if he no longer carried the weight alone. „A woman,“ he said. „Not here. Not from here. She was...“ He searched, as though trying to catch a word the air wouldn't give. „... the first who didn't look at me like I was a riddle she meant to solve. She looked at me as if I were an answer.“

I waited. Sometimes waiting is the most courteous part of truth.

„Her husband went to sea and didn't return. Not in the first month, not in the second. They say the sea doesn't take what doesn't belong to it, but the sea knows no deeds of ownership. I promised her I would help. And I did – in a way you don't speak of here without the walls listening.“ He glanced at me briefly, as if to see if I would flinch, if I would draw my hand back. I didn't. „There are places beneath the surface where the currents answer if you ask them kindly. I asked too often. I stayed too long. And I didn't find her husband – only others who no longer wanted to return. Maybe they found it hurt less under the world.“ He laughed softly, without joy. „When I came back, she looked at me as if I'd used the wrong door. She was in love with someone else – someone who wore shoes on solid ground. Her question had no meaning anymore. My promise remained. The sea doesn't forget. It never forgets when you give it something it hasn't asked for.“

„Then you have to take something from it,“ I said. „Give it something else. A trade.“

„Like what?“

I knew before I found the words, and it frightened me and made me calm all at once. „You – but differently. Not as a debt. As a choice.“

He closed his eyes, the rims of his lashes dark with wet. „The sea is no judge that understands poetry.“

„It does,“ I said. „It understands it too well. It hates it, because poetry takes something from it – the easy arithmetic. A life for a life. A promise for a catch. It hates what doesn't fit. That's why it wants you back – because you slipped from its sum.“

„And if it takes me, will you bring me back?“ he asked. There was no mockery, no hope in his voice. Only the quiet request not to lie.

„Yes,“ I said. „As long as I breathe. As long as I stand. As long as I can even lift a finger. I will bring you back.“

The words were light and heavy at once. They flew from my mouth into the storm and yet stayed in my body, settling where the heart lays its own nets. I felt Lucien lean toward me, hesitant, as if afraid to disturb what he was also seeking. I lifted my face, and he was there – warm and real – and the rain tasted of him, and I knew that in a kiss you don’t only touch skin, you touch a map that can lead you home when the way starts to blur. I laid my hands on his neck. It was cold. I warmed it with what I had.

„Heroine,“ he murmured against my lips, and my name – which moments ago had been like a lantern – was now a sea that did not hurt me.

I didn’t lose myself. I found myself in him. The sea howled, angry, yes, and the light beneath us glowed as if to remind itself, but it stayed where it was – below. Our breaths found a rhythm that had nothing to do with the wind. My body felt bright and heavy at once, my heart beat in a language I’d never learned and yet understood. I realised the trembling had gone from his hands. Another trembling remained – one I knew – and it had nothing to do with cold.

„I thought I was losing you,“ I said when we parted. My mouth still vibrated from the storm and from him, and it was a beautiful double sound.

„You’re not losing me,“ he said. He didn’t say it big. He said it as if handing me a small, hard piece of bread meant to keep me alive. „Not willingly.“

„Then that’s enough.“

We sat like that, and the world stayed the same and was different. The lighthouse blinked. It had counted us and kept the number. I leaned against Lucien’s shoulder and listened – not to the sea, not to the wind – but to something that arose between us, invisible yet heavy enough to hold. I thought of Adrien, of his face in the lightning, of the pain I’d seen there and didn’t want for him. I thought that I owed him something – truth, at least. The way truths are like rocks: you can avoid them until you eventually must walk alongside them.

„We can’t stay here forever,“ I said at last.

„No.“

„When we leave, we leave together.“

„Yes.“

It was no more and no less.

We stood. My knees were sore, as if the ground had told me its story – in the rough handwriting only rock can manage. Lucien offered me his hand, and I took it – not because I would fall without it, but because I wanted to go with it. As we left the shelter of the hollow, the wind slapped our faces again – offended, but resigned – and I had to smile at its moods, which had played so seriously with my life.

At the edge where the path began, I stopped. I looked down. The sea was still a single movement, wild, playful like a great raw force unsure what to do with itself. But the light in the depths had withdrawn. Not gone, not truly – just done with waiting.

„Do you still hear it?“ I asked.

Lucien tilted his head, listened as if holding a cup to a door. „It murmurs,“ he said. „But it doesn’t call

anymore.“

„Then we'll murmur louder,“ I answered, and he laughed – and in his laughter was the taste of rain and the promise of morning.

We climbed the path. The scent of heather grew stronger, mingled with the wet wood of fences, the metallic tone of cooling air, a hint of smoke drifting from the village. The few lights below were dim, but stubborn. I thought of my father in the tower, checking the lenses, the wicks, standing with his great silent body against the wind like a second pillar. I thought of Madame Séraphine and her brusque words, which always tasted like herbs – bitter and healing.

A bolt leapt across the sky without thunder, as if it had lost the strength to answer. In its flare I saw a figure at the bend in the path. He didn't stand in shelter – he stood open, as if placing himself to be seen. Adrien. His hat was gone, the rain had plastered his hair to his forehead. I halted. Lucien's hand in mine grew warm and still.

Adrien didn't step forward. He waited until we were level with him. His gaze flicked over our joined hands, lingered on our faces, and I felt as if something were taking my measure that I couldn't hold on to. He wasn't angry. That struck me most. Anger I could have fought. In his face there was something like recognition – and recognition is a quieter knife.

„Adrien,“ I said – and my name on his lips would have been wrong now, so he didn't speak it. He only nodded.

„The storm,“ he said, as if speaking for all three of us, because none of us could find words that didn't sound like excuses.

„It wanted him,“ I said.

Adrien looked at the sea, which was none of his business

and all of it. „It rarely takes what it hasn't been given,“ he said. „But sometimes it miscalculates the balance.“

I wanted to answer. I wanted to tell him I knew what I was doing, though I didn't. I wanted to tell him I'd never lied to him, except with my silence. Instead I stood there, my fingers holding Lucien's – and that was answer enough, even if it hurt him.

„Go home, Heroine,“ Adrien said softly. „The tower will need you if the morning comes late.“

„And you?“ I asked, though I knew the answer. Sometimes you ask a question because truth grows softer edges when spoken.

„I'll stay a while longer,“ he said. „I've lost something.“ He smiled so briefly it was like a twitch. „I want to see if the sea gives it back.“

„I'm sorry,“ I said.

He nodded. „Me too.“ He looked at Lucien – not like a judge, more like someone checking an account. „Take care of her,“ he said.

„I do,“ Lucien answered – plain, without claim.

Adrien stepped aside, giving us the path. „Go,“ he said. „The storm has told you enough for tonight.“

We went. I didn't turn around, because I knew I'd stop again, and I'd stood at too many edges tonight. But when we reached the next bend, the wind tore the clouds apart for a heartbeat. Below lay the sea, a black, restless body, the lighthouse casting its limping eye – and on the cliff, small but clearer than before, stood Adrien. The lightning – one last, slender stroke – etched him into the air. In the same second Lucien turned to me, pulled me close, as if to drink the cold from my bones, and kissed me – gentle, yet so certain the wind seemed to pause. It was no kiss

against the storm; it was a kiss within it. I felt the salt on his lips, tasted my fear melting away, and the courage that stayed. I knew, without looking, that Adrien saw it.

And in that image – the kiss at the cliff's edge, the sea like a rearing beast, the tower a limping eye, the lightning a cold blessing – the next morning was already there, though the night had only just begun.

The wind rose once more, wrenching the breath from my chest, as if it meant to steal the words before I could speak them. I held Lucien close, and when we parted I knew – as surely as I tasted the spray on my tongue – that Adrien stood above, silent, and that he had seen the kiss. I knew that recognition is sometimes louder than thunder. And I knew that in that moment he understood what I myself had only begun to grasp: that a heart does not bargain when the storm speaks its true name.



Chapter 14

The Kiss That Reveals Everything



The path away from the cliff's edge was no real path at all, but a narrow, storm-frayed line between sky and sea. The stones gleamed black, as though the water had polished them, and the heather lay flat against the ground, beaten down by the salty air. Above us the gulls cried, their calls thin and sharp as tearing paper. They circled in restless loops, as if sensing that the ground beneath us was not made of rock but of something breakable.

Lucien held my hand tightly – almost too tightly – as though he feared the wind might tear me from him. His fingers were still rough from the cliff edge we had just left behind, and I felt the warmth in them like a remnant

of life one cannot afford to lose. We walked side by side, yet the storm didn't just push us forward – it pushed us closer together, as if it meant to press our bodies until no space remained.

„You're cold,“ he said, without looking at me. It was not a question.

„Only on the outside.“

He gave a faint smile, and I knew he understood. The storm could not reach me where I was standing just then: in that moment, between his hand and my heartbeat.

A searing flash ripped the sky open and, for the fraction of a second, sketched the path ahead of us in light. In the same breath I froze. At the next bend, where the way narrowed, a figure stood. Motionless, coat open in the wind, face half in shadow – yet unmistakable.

Adrien.

His gaze found us long before we reached him. It did not waver, not for a single heartbeat. I could not tell whether the rain running down his face was washing something away or drawing something that had been there all along.

Lucien didn't slow his stride. I felt his hand tighten, felt the subtle arch of his back as though he wanted to stand taller, broader, more unyielding. I knew that tension in him: the mixture of defiance and challenge, as if he meant to tell the world it could not bring him to his knees.

Adrien spoke first. „A fine night for a walk,“ he said, his tone smooth as wet stone. No warmth, no open hostility – only something beneath it that cut sharper.

„It's more than a walk,“ Lucien replied, and there was a ring in his voice the wind could not tear apart. „But I suppose you already knew that.“

Adrien let his eyes pass briefly over him and settle on me. „I see what I see.“

I could have spoken. Perhaps I could have softened it. But the look Adrien gave me was not one that left room for explanations. It was a scale, and I knew he had already weighed the measure.

Lucien stopped, barely a step from Adrien. The air between them was denser than the rain soaking us. I stood at Lucien's side, felt his breath near mine, and in that moment I knew he would not yield.

„Sometimes,“ Lucien said quietly, „there's no need to explain what you can feel.“

And then – without warning – he turned to me, laid his hand at my nape, and drew me toward him. His mouth met mine, and the storm seemed to condense in that moment, as if it meant to devour us both. It was no tentative kiss, no cautious testing. It was a claim, a confession, and at the same time a provocation – to the wind, to the sea, to Adrien, who never took his eyes off us.

My heart beat hard against my ribs. I tasted salt – from the rain, from the spray, from him. My hands found his coat and clung, not from fear of the wind but because in that instant I wanted to hold nothing else.

Above us the gulls tightened their circles, their cries falling into the stillness between the peals of thunder. Somewhere far below, a wave struck the rock so hard that the impact came through the ground like a muffled heartbeat.

Lucien broke away only far enough for me to see his gaze – dark, resolute, unbroken. „Let him know,“ he whispered, „that you don't regret it.“

I felt the words echo inside me, and although my eyes

were drawn, unbidden, to Adrien, I kept my head high. His face was unmoved, but in his eyes something flickered – like a quick flash that finds no thunder.

„I would have wished it for you, Heroine,“ Adrien said, his voice now so soft the wind nearly swallowed it. „But not like this.“

Lucien started to reply, but I laid my hand on his arm. „Not now,“ I murmured, without breaking my gaze from Adrien. For what was happening between the three of us in that moment was like a knot you cannot untie in a storm – you must carry it until the air grows still.

Adrien only nodded, slowly, like a man who has passed judgment he will not reverse. Then he walked past us, so close his sleeve nearly brushed mine, and the scent of wet cloth and cold metal lingered in my nose long after his footsteps had faded.

Lucien exhaled – a sound between relief and anger. „He won’t let it rest.“

„No,“ I said. „But the sea never rests either.“

We went on, silent, while the wind drove us forward and the gulls still circled above our heads, as if they meant to remain witnesses until the story had been told to the end.

The air left a cutting chill on my skin, clinging like an unwelcome second garment. We walked on, each step sounding dull in our shoes, as though the path itself were holding its breath. Behind us lay the bend where Adrien had stood – a dark hook in the memory of the trail – and ahead the heather threw narrow shadows across the ground. The gulls had widened their circles, but their voices lingered, harsh and bright, as if they meant to fray the edges of my thoughts.

Lucien was silent for a time. Only his hand moved – barely, but enough for his thumb to graze over my

knuckles in a steady rhythm that wove itself into my pulse. When the wind dropped for a breath, I heard him draw in air – rough, but steadier than before.

„Do you regret it?“ he asked at last. No reproach. Just a question he ran like a blunt knife along his own arm to see if he could still feel.

„Kissing you?“ I said. „No.“

He nodded without looking at me. A small, exhaling nod, and yet not light. „He saw.“

„That was the point.“

„I know.“ His mouth twisted into a half-smile that didn't reach his eyes. „But knowing doesn't protect against pain.“

„I know,“ I said, and the admission burned, because it wasn't only meant for him.

We reached a place where the path was cut into the rock. To the right the slope dropped steeply, to the left the earth banked upward, matted with grass lying in thick, wet strands against the rise. The wind broke there, eddying, and between two gusts there opened something like stillness. Lucien stopped, stepped half a pace in front of me, and set his hands on my shoulders. His gaze was resolute, yet there was a shimmer of cautious question in it that warmed me more than any blanket.

„Say it again,“ he asked softly.

„That I don't regret it?“ I whispered.

„Yes. But not for his sake. For mine.“

„I don't regret it, Lucien.“

I saw something smooth out in him – not the guilt, not the restless shadow in his eyes, but the flutter that had been beating under his ribs like a bird. He leaned toward

me. This kiss was different – less a flag in the storm, more a spring to which I bent my head. I might have drunk longer if footsteps hadn't come up the path behind us – firm, too firm for accident.

We broke apart. I turned. Adrien stood ten paces away, as if the wind had set him at precisely that distance so his words could keep their strength without needing to shout. His hat was still missing, his hair clung to his forehead, and at the corners of his eyes hung rain that caught the next lightning flash like glass.

„Since when?“ he asked. No preamble, no greeting. His voice came as if up a thin wire strung from the village to us.

„Since the moment it no longer mattered if I hid it,“ I replied. Not the whole truth, but the truest I could find just then.

His gaze rested on our faces for a moment, as if searching them for a piece of evidence that would drop into his hand of its own accord. Then he looked at Lucien. „And you leave her standing like this? In the wind, in the talk, in whatever's coming?“

„I'm not leaving her at all,“ Lucien said evenly. „I'm going with her.“

Adrien gave a short, quiet sound – almost a laugh, but one ashamed of itself. „You don't go with anyone. You draw people to the coast of your stories and hope they learn to swim before the surf takes them.“

„Enough,“ I said – sharper than I intended.

He turned back to me. „I don't speak of things I haven't seen, Heroine. I speak of nights when men at the harbour whisper names that aren't their own, and of debts never counted in coins. I speak of the way you've been these past weeks. Of your hand that trembles when

the wind comes in off the sea. I thought..." He broke off, and the words hung between us as if the wind would decide whether to carry them away or force them down our throats. „I thought you'd at least turn when I stood behind you.“

„I did turn,“ I said. „Just not to you.“

It hit. I saw it hit – not in any dramatic motion, but in the way his gaze went empty for a heartbeat, like a lamp blown out. Then something else filled it: clarity, perhaps. That lean, merciless clarity that counts only what's left.

„Very well,“ he said. „Then hear me. I won't run to the harbour shouting what I saw. I won't fetch your father from the tower. The sea has enough eyes – it doesn't need mine. But you will have to choose, Heroine. Not today – today the sky promises only rain. But tomorrow, when people open the boards on their windows and wring out their nets, they'll talk. And the tower will count your steps, and your father will find questions that wait for no answers.“

„I know,“ I whispered.

„You know little,“ he said, almost gently. „But you'll learn.“

He stepped aside, as if to let us pass. His hand brushed the rock, and I saw his fingers twitch as though he'd only now felt the cold. „Go,“ he said. „Drink the rest of the storm off your tongue. You'll need it – the words you won't want to speak tomorrow.“

We walked on. I felt his gaze on my back – a warmth that hurt. Lucien kept silent again. Once he began to speak, but the wind threw the syllable back into his throat. Only when we reached a sheltered hollow ringed by low juniper bushes did he stop and turn to me.

„Should I have left you alone?“ he asked. „Would it have

been easier for you?“

„No,“ I said. „It would only have been... different. Pain has many names. I'd rather carry the one I choose.“

He nodded. „Then take mine, too.“

„I already have.“

We sat in the wind-shadow, as much as one could call it that here. The ground was damp and gave a little under our weight, as if some sleeping animal lay beneath. I drew my knees up, and Lucien spread his coat over us to break at least part of the rain. It smelled of wet leather, of salt, of him. For a time we heard only the whistling in the clumps of grass, the scrape of a loose stone rolling down the slope, and the broken, returning roar of the surf.

„Sometimes,“ he said, „I wish I could put you on the other side of the world, away from everything and everyone – just to see you laugh without the wind eating it.“

„And sometimes,“ I replied, „I wish I could set you by the well in Marenveil in broad daylight and say: Look, this is my joy.“

He laughed softly. „That would be a fine war.“

„We began it tonight.“

„Yes.“

We were silent again until my back ached from sitting and the next gust drove us to our feet. The path climbed in easy curves, away from the harsher breath of the spray. The gulls slipped out of sight, but their voices followed, as if they'd been tasked tonight with speaking over every human word. Above the village, which we could not yet see, hung a dull brightness – not morning, just a pale brewing in the belly of the clouds.

„When tomorrow comes,“ I murmured, „I don't want to run.“

„Nor I,“ Lucien said. „Not from you.“

„Then run with me – not away, but into.“

„Into what?“

„Into everything.“

He took my hand and set it over his heart. It beat steadily, like an animal that knows the stable yet stays outside. I felt the warmth beneath the wet fabric and thought that tonight I needed no home but that beat.

„Come,“ I said. „Before the wind remembers it meant to tear us apart again.“

We rose and walked on, step by step, until the path widened and the first low fences appeared, marking the dune tracks to nowhere. The village lay hidden behind a fold of rain, but its scent came to meet us: wet wood, smoke, fish, iron. I thought of my father's hands – broad as shovels – of the fine, patient motions with which he cleaned lenses as though they were the eyes of animals not to be startled. And I knew that tomorrow his gaze would find me like the beam of the tower – slow, circling, again and again, until nothing in me was left unlit.

Lucien stopped once more. „If it gets too hard...“ he began.

„I didn't let you fall just now,“ I said. „I can catch us both a second time, if I have to.“

He smiled now with his eyes. The wind carried half of it away, but the other half stayed with me. „Then come,“ he said. „A little further.“

The gulls cried again, suddenly nearer, and I looked up. Three sat on a leaning post, heads tilted as though

haggling over something we owed them. I gave them a nod – childish, perhaps – and followed Lucien into the grey brightness where the village finally began.

The first houses of Marenveil crouched like animals in the rain, backs hunched, windows narrow as half-closed eyes. The doors sweated salt, and from the gutters water dripped in steady bursts, as though counting the minutes of a night that knew no sleep. The streets were empty; only an old dog shot past us like a grey thought and vanished behind a barrel.

We didn't speak. Our steps found on their own the pace the village dictated, and I felt my body tense in a different way now – not against the wind, but against the eyes that might be sitting behind every curtain. Out there the storm was a spectacle the rocks and the tower performed for us; in here its messages turned to whispers that would run from mouth to mouth by morning.

At the end of the lane leading to the little square with the well, Lucien stopped. The square itself was a black cloth tonight; the pump gleamed, and the iron chain from which the bucket hung swayed lazily with each breath of air. Above the tavern a light flickered like a breath unwilling to die.

„Up to here,“ Lucien said. „Beyond this it will be loud.“

„It's always been loud,“ I answered. „Only our ears were quiet.“

He looked at me as though to feel the shape of that sentence in the air. „I didn't kiss you because of Adrien,“ he said. „I kissed you because that's how I breathe.“

„I know.“ I stepped closer, close enough for his coat to sweep the drops from my cheek. „And I kissed you because that's who I am.“

„Then we're agreed.“

„Not yet with the world.“

„That comes later.“

A shutter clattered, somewhere a door banged. I heard footsteps that didn't come closer, only existed for a moment before dissolving into the rain. The tower behind the rooftops turned its light; I couldn't see it, but I felt the slow, tireless motion, as though someone laid a hand over my head – not tenderly, but reliably.

„What will you tell your father?“ Lucien asked.

„The truth, but not all at once. No one can take it in during a storm.“ I breathed shallowly, as though the air were too thick to carry. „I'll tell him I was up there tonight. That I saw you. That Marenveil changes when you look at it from the cliffs. I'll tell him I'm going to the harbour in the morning to help mend nets, because the waves were high. And if he asks why my mouth tastes of salt, I'll say: the wind was everywhere.“

Lucien lifted a hand and touched my face with the back of his fingers – a gentle, almost shy gesture, as if he feared to burn me with his palm. „And if he asks whether you love me?“

„Then I'll answer: Yes. But I'll say it quietly.“

He inclined his head, and something like relief flickered through his features. „Quiet truths are the durable ones,“ he murmured.

„Sometimes also the sharpest,“ I said. „They cut longer.“

He smiled, and in that moment, in all that wet and weariness, I saw the boy in him – the one who might once have stood in some harbour and first understood that the world was too big to end in a single story.

„Will you go?“ I asked.

„Not far.“ He nodded toward the narrow alley leading to the abandoned net-menders’ shed. „It’s dry enough there to make it through the night. I’ll be at the pier at first light, when the men stand and decide whether the day belongs to them or to the sea.“

„Then I’ll come there.“

„And if they ask why?“

„Because I need to see what I’m choosing.“

He didn’t flinch at the word; he took it, weighed it, and I saw it didn’t frighten him. „And what do you choose?“ he asked anyway.

„Tonight I choose to keep walking. Tomorrow I’ll choose again.“

„That’s enough,“ he said, so seriously that the laughter knocking at me found no place.

A shadow shifted at the edge of the square, but didn’t step forward. I knew who it was before the next lightning stroke etched the face sharp: Adrien, leaning against the wall, arms folded, gaze fixed not on us but on the ground before our feet. I felt the air reorder itself between us, felt the rain, which had been indifferent a moment ago, become a curtain behind which someone stood.

„He hasn’t left,“ Lucien said softly.

„No,“ I replied. „He’ll be there tomorrow too.“

„Will you say anything to him?“

„Not tonight.“

I slipped from Lucien’s coat and took two steps forward, until I was close enough to see the shadow of Adrien’s lashes. He lifted his head slowly, as if to give me time to discard the moment.

„Adrien,“ I said. My voice was like a child’s hand on a

door – small, but clear. „I know what you saw.“

„I also know what I didn't see,“ he returned. „And that's what hurts.“

„What didn't you see?“

He held my gaze. „You turning around.“

I nodded. „Then see it now.“ I set my hand to my heart. „I'm turning. Not away from you, but toward myself.“

He didn't laugh. He didn't pretend it was a sentimental line. He took it like you take a wet rope: testing, hesitant, in the end firm. „Then cut clean,“ he said. „If you're going to cut, cut straight. I don't want to have to despise you. That would be the second-worst thing.“

„And the worst?“

„To keep hoping for you.“

It was a cruel sentence, and yet its cruelty was like a wound finally getting air. I felt the cold on my skin, but underneath warmth surfaced – not the kind that soothes at once, but the kind that endures.

„Thank you,“ I said. „For the part one can accept, and for the part one must bear.“

His mouth twitched. „Go,“ he repeated. „Before you start comforting me.“

I could have embraced him – not to give anything, but to draw a circle in the air in which we could both stand. I didn't. There are embraces that betray more than any sentence could mend. So I turned and went back to Lucien.

„He's right,“ Lucien said as I stepped beside him. „You're cutting tonight. Tomorrow they'll ask you how you bind the edges.“

„With threads I spin myself,“ I said.

„And if they break?“

„Then I'll knot them.“

He nodded. „Then go now. Morning has its eye on you, even while it sleeps.“

I wanted to say something to make the parting smaller, but small words in great nights are often lies. So I took his hand one last time, felt the rough grain of his skin I already knew by heart, and placed that memory in me like a stone in my pocket. Then I walked away, down the lane, past the tavern where the light still flickered as if waiting for a conversation that never came.

At our door I stopped. The threshold gleamed dark, the handle was cold, and through the wood came the scent of oil and something I associated with childhood – the deep, steady scrape of a chair over floorboards. My father was awake. The tower must never wholly leave us; it bore us, and we bore it. I laid my hand to my chest, felt my heartbeat, which despite everything wasn't running any faster than it had to, and drew breath.

Behind me the night shifted. A gull's cry rose – no longer sharp, rather tired, as if the birds had decided they'd seen enough. From far off, from the sea, came the muffled roll of one last, very large wave. The rain thickened – not as a sudden downpour, but as a dense curtain, as though the sky had more to say than could fit into drops.

I pressed the latch. It yielded with the quiet, decisive sound of a sentence accepted. Warm light met me, and I stepped inside.

„You're late,“ my father said without looking up. His voice was a rock you could bruise yourself on or hold fast to, depending on how you stood to it. „The storm has counted.“

„It miscounted,“ I answered, and my mouth did indeed

taste of salt. „I was two.“

He looked up. There was no surprise in his eyes, but a precise, grave attentiveness. „Tomorrow,“ he said.
„Tomorrow we talk.“

„Tomorrow,“ I echoed. I knew that tomorrow was not just a day, but a boundary. I also knew I did not want to avoid it.

I closed the door. The house took me in, with its sounds, its breath. In the room near the stove my coat hung – a dark shadow. I stood still, pressed my forehead to the cool wood, and let the wet drip from my hair into the quiet. And then, for some reason, I had to smile – not broadly, not defiantly. Just a fine, stubborn smile that said: I am still here.

Outside, the rain began to run in new channels, heavier, denser, as if the sky were rehearsing the word it would pour tomorrow. I listened to its steady drumming on the roof, a calm, melancholic beat that didn't threaten, only reminded. The wind had laid itself down. The sea spoke more softly. And inside me, the questions gathered – but with them also the answers that would no longer run.

I thought of Lucien in the shed with the nets, of Adrien in the shadow of a wall, of my father in the glow of his lamp. I thought of the square with the well, which would carry voices tomorrow, and of the pier where the men would stand, reading the clouds like strange yet familiar letters.

I did not blow out the lamp. I sat at the table and laid my hands flat on the wood, felt its cold and its patience. When morning came, I wanted to greet it awake – not with a confession that flooded the streets, but with a quiet that no longer denied what it carried.

The gulls fell silent. The rain stayed. And somewhere

between the drops running down the window I caught my own face for a heartbeat – not clear, only as a shadow. It was enough.

As the night shifted into a paler darkness that was no morning and yet smelled like one, the rain began to fall heavier – drops like small, unyielding decisions. They ran in threads down the panes as if the sky itself were weeping – not in anger, but in the quiet clarity of what is to come. I rose, drew my coat tighter, and knew: At the pier, among the nets and the men's silence, I would have to choose – home, or the storm; the safe harbour, or the forbidden love that still tasted of salt in my mouth.



Chapter 15 **The Tears of the Sky**



The rain began as a fine trembling on my skin, hardly more than a breath, and yet it carried the weight of the heavens gathering above Marenveil. I was still standing at the edge of the cliffs, where Lucien's kiss still burned on my lips like salt, and I felt something invisible had torn between us all. Adrien was gone—his footsteps lost to the darkness, heavy as stones thrown into the sea, never to be seen again.

I didn't know whether I should have followed him. Instead, I turned away from the roaring blackness toward the narrow path that led to Séraphine's cottage. The wind carried the scent of seaweed and wet wood, and somewhere deep below the sea answered with a growl, as

if to say: Run, while you still can.

Her hut crouched like a stranded ship at the edge of the pine forest. A flicker of light glowed inside, warm and treacherous, and the rain painted silver streaks across the small windowpanes. I didn't knock—my hand was already on the latch when Séraphine's voice came from within: "Come in, child. I've been expecting you."

She sat at the table, surrounded by bowls and candles whose flames quivered in the draft. Above it all hung the scent of dried herbs and something metallic, like blood long since dried. Her eyes followed me as I stepped inside, and I had the feeling she saw not only me, but the rain on my shoulders, the tangled thoughts in my head.

"You know why you're here." Her voice was neither a question nor a command, only a statement. I opened my mouth, ready to deny it, but the patter of rain on the roof filled the pause, as though it were my own breath.

"Lucien..." I began. The word was a stone I dropped into darkness—I didn't hear it hit bottom. "He... there is something he's hiding from me."

Séraphine rose, took down a bundle of herbs hanging above the hearth, and tore it free. The smell of rosemary and sage spread, sharp and bitter. "He hides it not only from you." She turned, her eyes suddenly like narrow cuts in the night. "The sea itself holds his secret, and the sea does not forget."

A flash split the sky, and for a moment the cottage seemed made not of wood and stone, but of pure light and shadow.

"Sit." She gestured to the chair opposite her. "You must hear something before the sky breaks."

I obeyed, my heart lodged in my throat, and felt the fire's

warmth slowly seep through my wet clothes. Séraphine laid her hand on the table—sinewy, old, yet filled with a strength that made me shiver. “Lucien carries a knot within him. A binding not born of this world. Whoever loves him must know that...” She broke off, as if an invisible thread pulled the words from her mouth.

The rain drummed louder, and I had the unsettling sense that something in the darkness outside was listening.

The storm had already climbed the hill, and the roof of Séraphine’s hut creaked as if it might lift off into the sky. The path gleamed black, polished by the rain, and each step was a gamble. We stood beneath the eaves, the three of us—my father, Adrien, and I—Séraphine behind us, her arms folded across her chest. The light from the hut spilled like a yellow breath into the night, barely reaching us.

“You belong at home,” my father said at last. No sternness in his voice, only fatigue. “Your mother is worried. And the tower needs me.”

“She needs an answer,” Adrien cut in, the word sharp. “We all need an answer.”

I looked at him. The rain running from his forehead made him look younger, more vulnerable. His eyes—usually calm as morning harbor water—were now dark and restless. I knew what he had seen. The kiss at the cliff’s edge. The defiance in it. The desperation.

“Adrien,” I began.

“No,” he said—and it wasn’t a hard no, more a breath that nevertheless shifted the world. “Don’t say my name like it’s a plea. Tell me instead what I need to know.”

The sea pressed itself against the rocks, withdrew, and returned; an animal that didn’t understand why it couldn’t come inside. I suddenly felt as though we were all on a

raft drifting into fog, each sentence ready to tip the balance.

“I didn’t mean...” I broke off. What I hadn’t meant had long since started its own story. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“That’s not will,” my father said quietly. “That’s a storm.”

SérAPHINE stepped from the light into the darkness, and the night made way for her. “The sea takes where the shore is softest,” she said. “Don’t ask about guilt when the sand gives way.”

“I’m not asking about guilt,” Adrien said—and I heard in his voice how much he was. “I’m asking for truth. As much as you can bear, Heroine.” He lifted his hand, let it hover in the air as if a bird might land there. “Do you love him?”

I closed my eyes, counted the drops running down my cheeks. Too many. Too few. Exactly enough to dissolve a sentence.

“I can’t...” I said, and then I fell silent.

The silence stretched. The rain filled it, the wind disturbed it, the sea chewed it and spat it out as foam. Inside that silence lay hundreds of sentences, and none of them were easy.

“Not saying,” Adrien understood, and his mouth twisted into something that was neither a smile nor a sob. “Not choosing. Not leaving. Not staying.”

“Not lying,” I whispered.

“That’s something.” His gaze fell on SérAPHINE, whom he didn’t trust, and who did not fear him. “And him? Where is he?”

“In the belly of the storm,” SérAPHINE replied. “Where

else would he be?"

My father pulled his coat tighter. "That's talk."

"That's a direction," she countered. "Sometimes a direction is everything."

The hut breathed behind us, the fire flared briefly as if it had lost patience. Séraphine placed something in my hand. At first it was only warm—then I felt its texture: braided strands of seagrass, threaded with something harder, a thin, salty cord. A small knot within it, no larger than a hazelnut.

"Carry this," she said, "for as long as the sky weeps. It will keep what tugs at you a finger's breadth away."

I studied the knot. "What is it?"

"A basket for remembering," she answered; the words sounded as though they had lain in water for a long time. "It catches what would fall. That's all I can give you today."

Adrien watched us, and I felt how much he must not know what he nevertheless saw. "I don't want you caught up in things that will tear you apart," he said—and in that you I heard another word hiding: us. "Nothing called love should leave you so cold."

"Cold?" I raised the hand holding the knot. "I'm not cold. I'm..." I searched, found no word, found instead the nearness of the sea, now breathing in short, sharp bursts. "I'm as if I had two skins: one that's wet, and one that burns."

My father stepped closer, his shadow falling over my face. "Child," he said—and in that word lay all his awkwardness, all his courage—"I know nothing of curses. I know only nights when the light goes out and you must light it again. Stay with us. Stay where you're

known.”

I thought of the tower, of the steps I could climb blind, of the glass my father had polished until it shone like a lily even in fog. And I thought of Lucien’s hands smelling of salt, of his voice sometimes sounding as though it had already turned away from the world.

“I don’t know,” I said—and it wasn’t evasion, but a small, unguarded truth. “I don’t know how to choose between two waves when they lift and pull me at the same time.”

“You don’t have to choose today,” Séraphine said. “Today you only have to not lie.”

Adrien closed his eyes, breathed deeply once, as if trying to match the sea’s rhythm. “Then I’ll ask you again tomorrow,” he said. “And the day after. Until you find a word that isn’t only water.”

I nodded. It was poor comfort for him; but perhaps better than giving him a pretty, polished lie that would later taste bitter.

Far off, a cold glow flickered in the bay—a reminder of the uncanny light that had once followed us. The rain no longer fell in drops but in threads that cut the air to pieces. Sparks sprayed above the sea, as if someone had lit invisible fuses. Séraphine positioned herself so she could look down the slope, and I felt her focus tighten.

“He’s not calling for you,” she said, “but the sea is.”

I heard it. Not as a sound— as a pull. A tug deep in my chest. A word not spoken but known: Come. I clenched my teeth until it hurt.

“I’ll walk you to the hut, Maren,” my father said. “Then I’ll go to the tower. The storm...” He trailed off; the facts explained themselves.

Adrien stepped back, as though deciding not to lose the

war in this moment. "I'm leaving," he said. "But not far." He looked at me, and there was no reproach in his gaze, only a plea that fit on no tongue. "If you fall, call for me."

"And if I swim?" I asked.

"Then swim," he said. "But don't swim alone."

He turned away. The rain swallowed him in a few steps. My father put his arm around my shoulders; he did not tremble. Séraphine simply nodded, as if we were now on a track she had rehearsed in her sleep for years.

"Come back tomorrow," she murmured as I passed her, so softly only the wood could hear. "With dry hands. And with the truth you couldn't find today. Then we'll talk about what may be lost to save a heart."

I gripped the knot of seagrass so tightly it pressed into my skin, and followed my father into the night, smelling as though the sky itself had wept.

The steps to the lighthouse were filled with sand, the rain having turned them into a slick skin. My father walked ahead, his shadow broad and reliable, yet the tower seemed tonight like an animal with its teeth clenched. When we reached the door, he laid his hand on the latch and looked at me—not as a warden, not as a judge, but as a man who knew no one gives orders to a storm.

"Get some sleep," he said. "Morning makes us all more honest."

"More honest or more tired," I replied, trying to smile. It didn't work.

Inside smelled of oil, metal, and the old dust of things that endure. I lit a small lamp; its light didn't carry far, but it didn't flicker either. My father checked the instruments, as methodically as if the sky had no influence on his

hands. Then he turned to me, pulling me briefly into an embrace. "I don't know how to mend a heart," he murmured into my hair. "But I know how to protect a light—you hold your hand so the wind passes around it."

I nodded against his shoulder. When he climbed the stairs to tend the glass above, I sat on the lowest step and cradled my head in my hands. The roar of the storm became, under the thick walls, something distant yet everywhere at once. I thought of Adrien, walking somewhere outside, his brow in the rain. I thought of Lucien, breathing somewhere in the belly of the storm. Of Séraphine, whose eyes knew more than was safe.

The lamp cast warm islands onto the stone. I pulled the knot of seagrass from my pocket, turned it between my fingers. "A basket for remembering," she had said. "It catches what would fall." I waited for something to fall. A sentence, perhaps. A name. A sound. Instead, only a drop slid from my chin into my lap, leaving a dark spot on my skirt.

When I rose, it was without thinking. My steps carried me not upward, but out. The storm shifted aside for me, let me pass, as if it knew I was my own burden. I took the path to the cliffs, which gleamed in the night like a scar. Below, the sea raged, its spray tasting as though it had gathered tears along the way.

At the edge, I stopped. I raised my hands, as if I could hold the air still. A few times, far out, lightning flared; the light was unearthly, blue-green, not meant for human eyes. I imagined Lucien there, standing somewhere between water and nothing, laughing quietly at me. I'm not there, he said in my memory. I'm always where the sober don't look.

"Come back," I whispered into the wind. My words were instantly wet. "Or send me something that doesn't lie."

Something stirred. Not out there, but around me, in the air. A crackle ran along the metal railing of the lookout, a cold whisper tracing it like a fingertip. I looked—and saw them: tiny tongues of flame that did not burn, only glowed, sharp and still, as if the storm had lit a silent prayer. It was the light the old ones spoke of when they told of the wrath of days—not dangerous, but warning. A Mind your step spoken by the sky itself.

I lifted the knot to my lips. “If you are my breath,” I murmured, “then stay. If you are my knife, be honest.”

The rain eased—not much, just enough that one could count the drops again. In the distance, a dark body moved through the waves—not large, not small, more the idea of something. I held my breath, but the sea swallowed the shape. Only the trace remained, sharper than any proof.

“I can’t,” I repeated, this time to myself, and heard the silence grow large again. I couldn’t choose, I told myself, but perhaps that was exactly what I had to do. I couldn’t lie, I told myself, and yet I lied when I kept silent. I couldn’t stay, I couldn’t go. Between those two nots lay a narrow bridge of salt.

The night had begun to turn. Somewhere a dog barked, too far away to comfort. I stepped back, then again. When I turned, I saw a figure standing on the path—so still I nearly missed it. Slim, dressed entirely in darkness made slick by the rain. The face was shadowed. For a heartbeat I thought it was Lucien, and my heart stumbled. But when she raised her head, I saw the outline: not him. Her.

“You shouldn’t go to the edge when the sky has tears,” Séraphine said. Her voice seemed to rise from the ground beneath my feet. “You never know what it will take.”

“Whom?” I asked. “The light? The guilty? The foolish?”

“Those who believe they can breathe twice when there’s only enough air for once.” She came closer, rainwater running down her face in narrow channels, as though they were paths often traveled. “Come.”

“Now?”

“Yes. Now. Tomorrow they’ll ask you to be quiet. Tonight you may still think aloud.”

I followed her. It was inexplicable, but my feet felt suddenly steadier, as if they had decided to trust the ground. Séraphine did not walk quickly, and I understood that was deliberate: some paths in the night can only be found when you’re in no hurry to reach the end.

When we reached the hut, the fire still burned. It smelled of resin and something sweet caught in the smoke. Séraphine opened the door, let me in, closed it, and the night slipped off me like a wet coat.

“You wanted a truth,” she said without preamble. “I’ll give you one that doesn’t bite, but keeps the tongue awake.” She went to a shelf, reached into the half-light, and brought out a flat box, seemingly made of wood that had never stood in a forest—too smooth, too dark, as if the sea itself had grown it. Lines were carved into its surface, looking like waves or script.

“The curse,” she began—and I felt the word thicken the air—“is a contract. Not one of paper. One of breath. It doesn’t bind only the one it’s laid upon.” She set the box on the table and stroked it. “Such things are never... one-sided.”

I waited, feeling the waiting brace my spine. “Who is the other side?” I whispered.

“The sea,” she said. “And what it holds. Some call it the Old Ground. Others call it Patience. I call it the Depth.” She looked up. “It wants what we all want: something

that stays. Something that doesn't run. It's just not very good at asking gently."

I thought of Lucien, standing sometimes at the water's edge as though trying to speak a language his tongue didn't know. "And what does it want from him?"

"Not from him," she corrected softly. "From what lies between you." Her fingers rested on the box. "Between two people, a third space is born. Unborn, but alive. Some call it love, some sin, some betrayal. The Depth calls it gift."

"Gift," I repeated, and the taste of the word was both new and old. "And if one doesn't give it?"

"Then the Depth takes something else. It is patient, but not polite."

I said nothing. The hut creaked as the wind leaned against it. Something in me also creaked, quietly; not breaking, but yielding.

"You will have to choose," Séraphine said at last. "Not between two men. Not between the tower and the waves. Between two ways of breathing." She pulled the box closer to herself. "Do you want to hear how one learns that?"

I realized my hands were trembling. I laid them flat on the table, felt the wood warm as if it had a pulse. "Yes," I said. It came easier than I'd thought. "But... not all of it. Not yet."

Séraphine nodded, as if she had been waiting for exactly that. "Good," she said. "The mouth should know when to give the tongue only half." She placed her hand on the lid of the box, without opening it. "We'll speak of names when the morning turns grey. And of sacrifice when the sun tries to remember how to rise."

The word sacrifice hung between us like a drop that would not fall. I watched the candle flame grow taller, then smaller again, as if wrestling with something unseen.

"It will hurt," I said, not knowing what I spoke of, and knowing it was true.

"Everything that's true hurts somewhere," she replied. "But not everything that hurts is true."

I breathed in, out, in. Outside, the sea pounded the rocks, as if trying to bore its way to us. In that sound there was no anger now, only persistence. I thought of my father's hand on my shoulder, Adrien's gaze, Lucien's laughter in the rain. Of the knot of seagrass in my pocket, still warm, as if it had a small body of its own.

"Tomorrow," I said. "I'll come back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Séraphine confirmed. "With dry hands. And with a sentence you won't want to spit out."

I stood. My body was heavy, but no longer rigid. I went to the door, laid my hand on the wood. When I opened it, air smelling of iron and spring—though it was autumn—brushed against me. The rain had calmed; it fell now as though it only needed to smooth the edges.

"Heroine," Séraphine called softly after me. I turned. "If you dream tonight, put the knot under your pillow. What falls, let it fall. What stays will still be there tomorrow."

I nodded. "And if nothing falls?"

"Then you have both hands free," she said, "and that's more dangerous than any knife."

Outside, the night embraced me for the second time, but it was no longer the same. The path to the town was soft, the pines stood still as if they had promised the wind something. I thought of chapters, of pages, of sentences already written, and of those that still had to wait. I

thought of a sacrifice I could not yet name. I thought of a truth I would be able to carry tomorrow like a brimming pail—spilling, yet necessary.

As I neared the first houses of Marenveil, I heard the sounds that had soothed me since childhood: the rattle of a loose shutter, the deep, steady hum of the tower, the huu of wind through a certain alley. The world pretended to be the same. Perhaps it was. Perhaps only I had changed.

At our door, I stopped, looked up, and saw the lighthouse blink—a single eye that did not judge me. I placed my hand over my heart and felt the rhythm that had never quite calmed tonight. I took the knot from my pocket, held it to my lips as if to breathe courage into it. Then I went inside.

The silence in the house was friendly. I set down the lamp, stepped into my room, and slid the knot beneath my pillow, just as *Séraphine* had said. For a moment I stood still, fingers on the edge of the bed, listening for a step no one would take. Then I lay down. My hair smelled of rain and sea. I closed my eyes.

Sleep didn't come; it sat at the foot of the bed and waited, as if it too was eager for tomorrow. I wasn't sad. I wasn't happy. I was a door left half open. Outside, the sky began to weep again, softer now—the tears of the sky, I thought, perhaps the only clean thing in this night.

"Tomorrow," I whispered into the dark, knowing the word was a direction. "Tomorrow."

And with that quiet promise, burning like a candle under my ribs, I slipped into the space between chapters—where the sea listens, the elders keep their silence, and *Madame Séraphine* already has her hand on the box, ready to open what will be called *Madame Séraphine's Secret*.



Chapter 16 **Madame Séraphine's Secret**



Morning didn't come; it seeped in. A grayish light crawled over the rooftops of Marenveil as if it had scraped its knees in sleep and now dared barely to step onto the street. I woke before the tower's low hum changed its note, reached under my pillow for the knot of seagrass, and felt it had grown warm, as if it had held my hands through the night. I lingered a moment, listening to the house—the breathing of the walls, the faint crackle of the beams—as though it too was waiting for someone to speak the first words of the day. No one did. So I rose.

Rain traced a fine runnel down the windowpane, no more than breath on glass. I washed my face in cold water that smelled of stone, tied my hair into a knot meant to hold

together what in me threatened to come apart. When I opened the door, the air was thick with iron and unsaid things. I slipped on my coat, took the seagrass knot in hand, and left.

Marenveil was quiet on mornings like this, as if the town hid from its own reflection. A fisherman pushed a barrow over the cobbles, his dog following like a shadow that had forgotten how to run. No call came from the direction of the tower; later my father would sit on the steps, polishing the lantern glass as though he could buff the sky itself to brightness. I turned down the path that wound along the edge of the woods, the pines today looking as though they carried secrets in their arms.

Séraphine's cottage stood where it always had, yet it seemed altered: the windows were fogged as though they had been weeping all night, and the smoke from the chimney smelled sweeter than usual. I didn't knock. "Come in," she said before my fingers touched the latch, and I obeyed, the way one obeys a rhythm learned before birth.

Inside it was warm. Herbs hung from the beams like small sleeping creatures. The fire in the hearth chewed at a lump of resin, sighing whenever it found a sweeter vein. On the table lay the box I had seen yesterday: dark, smooth, as if the sea itself had grown it. Beside it sat a shallow earthen bowl of water, in which three shells rested—not white, but gray, as though they carried the remainder of a storm inside them.

"With dry hands," Séraphine said, lifting an eyebrow.

I showed her my palms. "Dry."

"And with a sentence you won't want to spit out again?"

I nodded, needing still a breath too many before I could say it. "I've come to listen."

“That’s a good beginning.” She pointed to a chair. “Sit down, child.”

I sat, and the cottage seemed to do the same. The wood, the walls, even the smoke settled. Séraphine went to the window, brushed a fogged patch clear with the back of her hand, looked outside briefly, then back at me, as though checking if the world out there was ready for what we were about to do in here.

“Today we speak names,” she said, returning to the table. “Not all of them. Not in full. But enough so you won’t be speaking against the storm, but into it.”

“Lucien,” I said, his name soft in my mouth and at the same time sharp. “What about him?”

She touched the box only with her fingertips, as though testing its temperature. “He belongs to the Depth,” she said without detour. “Not like a stone. Not like a ship gone down. Like a breath that has been borrowed.”

The fire cracked. A tear of resin ran down the logs. “Borrowed,” I repeated. “From whom?”

“From the ground that is not made of sand,” Séraphine replied. “From what some call Patience and others Hunger. From what lies under the black on certain nights like a thought no one shapes, but that shapes itself nonetheless.”

I remembered Lucien’s breathing when he slept—that faint pause between in and out, that jolt when he found the thread again. “Since when?” I asked.

“Since he was returned,” she said, and I knew the answer held an entire story—a past storm, a choice, a price not yet paid. “You want to know how he was bound. I will show you. But first you must hear something that doesn’t live in words.”

She nodded toward the bowl of shells. "Don't touch the water. Just lean in."

I did. On the surface there was no dust, no bubble: a smooth, gray calm. I leaned closer until my breath sent a shiver across it, and in that shiver, for an instant, something flashed—lines like cracks in glass—and then it was gone.

"This is where one speaks a name," Séraphine said. "Not loudly, not softly. Truly."

"Which name?" I asked, and felt at once the wood under my hands grow cooler at the question.

"The knot," she said. "Like every binding, it has a word that makes it wise and another that makes it remember. I'll tell you the remembering word. The wise word I'll keep, until you need it—or until you refuse it."

"What is it called?"

Séraphine breathed once, and the cottage seemed to share her lungs. "It is called: Salt-Vow."

The shells in the bowl vibrated; not violently, but distinctly—a fine tremor that spread through the water like a rumor. I drew back my hand though I hadn't touched the surface. "Salt-Vow," I repeated, and the shells trembled again, as if they had recognized my mouth.

"They don't hear you," Séraphine said. "They hear that the word has found a place."

"What does it do?" I asked, and the little word it suddenly bore far too much weight.

"It binds breath to depth," she said. "It binds the one who is saved to what saved him. And it binds the one who calls to whatever answers."

I thought of the kiss on the cliff, of the way the wind had

driven the drops in the wrong direction, as if it didn't want to touch us. "And how is it broken?"

"With a counter-gift." She didn't look away. "Not with coin. Not with blood alone. With something the Depth seldom gets, yet likes when it is true."

I felt a space open in me with no furniture inside. "Something of me," I said. There was no question mark; perhaps because I feared the answer it would earn.

"Perhaps," she said. "Perhaps something that speaks through you. The Depth is not sentimental. It takes what fits."

I said nothing. Outside, a wet branch slapped against the glass, as though knocking. The light in the room stood still, as if it had slipped off its shoes somewhere. "Show me," I said at last. "Show me the knot, the Salt-Vow. Show me where it lies."

S raphine nodded. "First the map," she said. "Then the name. Then the price—but only so that you can walk with it, without yet paying."

She drew the box closer, laid both hands on the lid as if blessing it, then lifted it.

Beneath lay a neatly folded sheet of parchment, but thick enough to feel like skin—not of an animal, but of a time that had shed its fingers. Lines had been scored into its surface and traced in something dark that was not ink. It smelled of salt and a distant summer that had belonged to no one.

"This is Marenveil," S raphine said, running her nail along a line that showed the coast: the familiar teeth of the cliffs, the bay that on some days felt like a smile and on others like a blow. "And this"—she tapped a small, irregular hollow beyond the sandbar—"is the Channel of Patience. Some call it the Scar. I call it the Depth

pretending to be shallow.”

I bent closer. In the drawing nothing moved—yet I had the impression of a faint shimmer running along the lines where the sea was drawn. “So there,” I said. “There he could be free.”

“There the Vow might listen,” she corrected. “Free is a big word. But there you have the best chance of meeting it with a truth it will respect.”

“And me?” I asked. “What is my part?”

“You are the mouth that does not lie,” Séraphine said simply. “And perhaps the hand that lets something fall. Or holds.”

I set my fingers on the edge of the map, felt the dryness of the parchment, the dampness of the sea beneath it. “When?” I whispered.

“Not at high tide,” she said with a thin smile. “And not when the moon is so proud it won’t hide its face. We need the in-between. Ebb that still remembers being flood. Flood that is still ashamed of being ebb. And...” She tilted her head, as though listening to an invisible choir. “...We need the sky to speak.”

I thought of the silent wedges of light that had drawn their blades over the bay last night. “It will speak,” I said, glancing past her to the window. Above the sea already hung a strip of brightness that wasn’t.

“Then we are two and something third,” said Séraphine. “No one asks for more, except those who can never get enough.”

I lifted the seagrass knot to my ear, as if it might tell me whether I was still in time. It was silent. Perhaps silence was the truest assent.

“We will speak the name,” Séraphine said. “Not the wise

word. The remembering word is enough to tap on the door. You will feel if it opens. Even if it's only the crack a wind can whistle through."

I nodded. The parchment lay between us like a resting creature. I breathed in, counted to three, and let the breath out slowly—as if not to hurt the air.

"Salt-Vow," I said.

The shells vibrated.

The flame in the hearth shrank like an eye dazzled by light.

And somewhere very deep, where the gray of morning turns to water, something not large enough to need to be large to change the world slid a finger-breadth closer to us.

There are words that cut the air. Others make it thick. The remembering word belonged to the second kind: the room grew heavy, but not hostile, an arch of breath in which even my heart moved more quietly. Séraphine laid a hand briefly on my wrist, as if checking whether I was still counting, then withdrew it.

"Now listen," she said. "Not to me. To what moves through both of us."

I listened. At first I heard only the familiar things: the occasional sigh of the hearth fire, the drip falling from the window sash, the distant cry of a gull that, in the damp, sounded as though it carried too much fur. Then I heard something else. No tone—more a stroke, as though someone drew a line with a wet finger across skin that wasn't mine yet fit me perfectly.

"He didn't bear it willingly," Séraphine said, and I didn't know whether she spoke of Lucien or the Vow itself. "But he didn't scream when it wrapped around him."

Some things don't scream when they're true."

"When was that?" I asked, my mouth suddenly dry.

"On a night when men thought they could persuade the sky. The nets were full, the water calm, and the jokes aboard better than those told later. Then the world tipped. Not quickly—in steps. A wave that didn't want to end. A wind that wasn't where it had just been. A light none of them had seen before, yet it felt like childhood." She paused. "The ship stayed. They didn't."

"Who?"

"Enough to make a village silent. Not enough to tire the world."

I pictured Lucien, and realized I had never asked how old he'd been when he began breathing differently. "He was taken," I said, and it didn't sound like a question.

"He was borrowed," Séraphine corrected. "And returned because someone spoke the right sentence. Not loudly. Perhaps not even with their mouth. Someone who knew the Depth listens when you demand nothing but lay yourself down like a shadow. Someone who..." She broke off, and I knew there was a gap here no one would close who still bought bread today.

"Who was it?" I whispered.

"There are questions you take to the shore and let fall 'by accident,'" Séraphine said. "If they stay, they belong here. If they vanish, they weren't for today."

I pressed the seagrass knot to my lips. "And why—for what—did the Depth seek him? Why him?"

"Because he could do what the Depth cannot: love without holding. And because he couldn't do one thing it can: forget without losing."

“That sounds as if...” I trailed off. You can say many things and still only move the chairs in the room.

“It sounds as if he fit,” Séraphine said. “Fits are rare. The Depth doesn’t measure. It has the patience to wait until something matches.”

The bowl of shells vibrated again, this time not just a fine tremor but a faint hum I felt in my teeth. “Is it speaking now?” I asked.

“It is remembering,” said Séraphine. “That’s enough for me. I don’t want to hear more of it indoors today.”

She pushed the bowl aside and turned the map so the coastline faced me. “See this?” Her fingertip touched a spot beyond the sandbar: a field of fine notches, as though someone had tried to comb the waves into order. “That’s the channel. At low tide it looks like an open mouth, at high like a closed eye. There you don’t speak names, you lay them down. And when the Depth picks them up again, you know if it believed them.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Then it eats the word, and you go home, and something in you is older without being wise.”

I leaned closer. The parchment smelled more strongly of salt than I had expected. “How do you get there?”

“Not in a boat that boasts,” Séraphine said. “And not on feet that think every stone is kin. You walk the flat back of the sandbar when the water drops its shoulders. And you don’t turn back when the first lightning startles your skin. You think in straight sentences. You carry little. You hold not to things, but to words.”

I thought of my shoes, already too heavy yesterday. “And what do I take?”

“The knot. The map—not in the box, but in your heart.

And a sentence that isn't decoration."

I nodded. "Which sentence?"

"The one you won't want to spit out again," she said, smiling so tiredly I almost thought the cottage smiled too. "You began it yesterday."

I wanted to protest, but found nothing to justify my mouth. Instead I asked: "And the price? What will it demand?"

Séraphine blew a strand from her brow. "It never wants what you expect. It doesn't take the gold that shines, or the tear just born. It likes things that can't be collected: breath bound to someone. Time that refuses to be measured. Words no one takes back."

"Breath," I repeated. "Time. Words." I set my hand on the map, and the faint shimmer ran over my finger as if it belonged to the drawing.

"For you," Séraphine went on, "it could be something you've never given though you've given much. Or something that will be returned to you when you're old, and that you won't need then. But today..." She raised a finger, as if pointing out a star. "Today we don't say it."

"Because otherwise I'd have paid before I arrived," I said, without knowing how I knew.

"Yes," she said simply. "And because some prices grow if you give them too much sun."

The fire in the hearth cracked in agreement. Outside, a gust of wind ran through the pines, shaking loose needles that spun through the air like gray sparks. A scent of shifting rain—the moment when the sky decides whether to stop or begin—slid under the door.

"We don't go today," Séraphine decided. "Not with this moon. Not with this heartbeat. We go when the air

knows it's needed. That won't be long."

"And until then?"

"Learn the map," she said. "With your fingers. Not with your eyes. Eyes are vain creatures."

I closed mine and traced the lines: the cliffs, whose jagged edges I knew like my own teeth; the bay, sometimes welcoming us in, sometimes shutting us out; the sandbar, pretending to carry us, then to drop us. The channel was cooler than the rest, a narrow, stubborn strip that felt like a band of metal beneath skin.

"And now," Séraphine said after a while, "we say the name once more. Both of us. Not to provoke it. To show we can wear it without adornment."

"Salt-Vow," I said.

"Salt-Vow," she echoed.

The shells hummed, the flame in the hearth tilted left and then right, as if greeting two directions destined to meet tomorrow. I opened my eyes. "If I go," I said, "and if I find him—or myself—what then?"

"Then you will be asked," Séraphine replied. "Without words. And you will answer without knowing you're already speaking. If what you give is true, the Depth will be courteous. If it's only beautiful, it will send you where beauty grows old."

"I'm not ready for that," I said.

"No one is," she countered. "But some carry the right breath in their mouth."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you learn it. There is still time."

She took the bowl of shells and set it closer to the window. "I don't want them to hear everything. Some

things are jealous.”

“Are shells jealous?”

“If they’ve listened long enough, yes.”

I laughed briefly—a false, small sound that immediately shamed itself against the ceiling. Séraphine arched a brow. “It’s good to laugh,” she said. “Not to make things lighter. To keep them from growing stiff.”

I slowed my breathing. The house seemed to breathe with me. I lifted my fingers from the map, and it kept its warmth, as though I had drawn a piece of it into my blood.

“One more thing,” Séraphine said. “When we go to the channel, you’ll carry nothing of metal. No ring. No button, if it can be helped. The Depth likes metal, but doesn’t trust it. And—” She hesitated. “—if something calls you that sounds like you and yet isn’t you, you don’t answer. Let it call. If it’s meant for you, it will find you without an answer.”

I nodded, a sudden calm settling over me. So calm I could hear the rain outside again—a rain no longer hesitating, but entirely decided.

The afternoon broke time into larger pieces. The light grew heavier, as though it had been working, and Séraphine’s cottage now smelled more strongly of resin and something metallic that had nothing to do with blood and yet everything to do with closeness. We spoke little. She let me trace the map with my eyes closed until my fingers found the channel without my mind ordering them to. I watched the fire snag on a fork in the wood, as if it had left a story there and lingered to remember it. Once, Séraphine placed a cup in front of me without a word; the tea tasted of thyme and salt.

When the light outside turned into a color that couldn’t

bear a name, Séraphine lifted the bowl of shells back onto the table. “Now,” she said. “Once more. And this time we place a name in it.”

“Which one?”

“Not his. Yours.”

“Mine?”

“Whoever speaks into the Depth must first know who speaks. Otherwise the wind babbles.”

I leaned forward. The water was smooth and dark. I didn’t see my face in it, only the possibility of one. “Heroine,” I said, and the name sounded as though it had been spoken many times and was yet new.

The shells vibrated. One moved—not far, just a short, restrained twitch, as if the water itself had flinched. I drew in a sharp breath.

“Good,” murmured Séraphine. “They’ve heard you.”

“And if I...” I faltered. “If tomorrow I lay my name down—and they don’t take it?”

“Then you lay it down again,” she said. “You can say your name twice without losing it. Three times should be avoided.”

“And if it falls?” My hand cooled with the scent of water as I brushed my forehead. “If it falls and doesn’t return?”

“Then you are no one for the silence between two waves,” Séraphine said. “And then you very quickly are someone again. But perhaps not the same.”

I looked at her. “That’s the price?”

“That is a price,” she said. “Not the price. We don’t speak that one today.”

A gust shoved at the cottage as though it were only a

beached boat. A distant thunder rolled over the bay, dry and deep, like a great old cough. I glanced at the window. A thin greenish line of light lay on the horizon, as if the sea meant to spit up a glow. "It's coming," I said.

"Yes," said Séraphine. "And it will ask."

I set the seagrass knot into the bowl without letting go. "If I say 'no'?"

"Then it says 'a pity,'" she replied. "And you go home and learn to live with a mouth that tries to breathe twice."

"And if I say 'yes'?"

"Then it goes quiet. And after that it grows very loud. And after that quiet again. Some call that deliverance. Others call it the most ordinary of catastrophes: that something ends."

The thunder drew closer. Somewhere a roof tile rattled as though it had suddenly taken a chill. Séraphine placed the knot back into my hand. "Take it. It's only a tether for the mind, not for the feet. But tonight the feet will be less stubborn."

We stood for a while without standing: two bodies in the same room, agreed that the Third set the tone tonight. I felt a strange peace—the kind you have when you stand before a door you know will open no matter what: inward or outward, and both with consequences.

"When the lightning comes," Séraphine said, "you'll think it's meant for you. It isn't. It's meant for what stands behind you. Don't turn around."

"And if someone calls my name?"

"Then you say, 'Later.' Loud enough for the air to understand. Quiet enough for no one to take offense."

I laughed, this time almost without shame. "And if no

one calls?"

"Then you keep walking," she said. "That's the hardest thing."

The rain began again, heavier now. It didn't fall from above; it came from everywhere, in slanted lines that carved the evening into fields. Séraphine snuffed the candles down to one. Its light was small and earnest. "You don't go to the channel tonight," she said again, "but you don't go home to sleep, either. You go to lay your yes and your no side by side and see which one air-dries. If both stick, you wait until the wind decides."

"And you?"

"I'll wait here," she said. "I've done my walking."

I nodded. "When I come back..."

"...you'll know whether you must go," she finished. "And if you must, you won't ask if anyone's coming with you. Some roads are big enough for two, but only one may start them."

The door was cold under my hand. It smelled of wet wood and the first lightning. "Salt-Vow," I said once more, to no one in particular, and the shells in the bowl answered with a faint hum.

"Go," said Séraphine.

I stepped out.

The rain struck my forehead, my neck, my hands. The air was charged; each step crackled as if I walked on invisible leaves. I took the path downward, which was no longer a path but a river of dark sand and pine needles. The bay lay open before me like an ear that would accept no excuse. A white light swept over the sea, blue within it, unearthly, and the fences of the gardens creaked in assent.

I didn't go to the tower. I didn't pass by home. I went to the water.

It smelled of iron, of algae, of the secret of a ship whose name no one posted anymore. I stood where the sand grew shallower, where the first ridges of the sandbar hinted at themselves. I lifted the knot to my mouth.

"If you are my breath, stay," I whispered. "If you are my knife, cut only where it is already white."

The wind held the air still, like a child trying to run away. I took a step. And another. The rain thickened. In my left ear the world hummed, as if a bee made of light lived there.

I walked to where the channel could not be seen yet could be known—by the change in smell, in the skin at my ankles. I stopped. I laid my yes and my no side by side. I waited. I didn't think of Lucien. I thought of him without wanting to. I didn't let the thought go; I let it lie where it fell.

Lightning.

For the space of one heartbeat, I was made of glass.

Thunder.

For the space of two heartbeats, I was earth.

"Later," I said into the air, and heard my own word return, softer but whole.

Then something happened that was no grand gesture yet made my knees weaken: a hand touched mine. Not from the dark, not from the light—from the direction where the world has an unseen edge. The fingers were cold and familiar, salty and true. They asked nothing. They took nothing. They offered.

I took them.

The storm tore the night into pieces and put it back together, and I knew, without knowing how, that the next page had already begun to write itself: hand in hand, lightning making us white, the coast grinding its teeth—and somewhere between Later and Now we search for a line we can walk without falling.

I did not look back. The Depth breathed. And I breathed with it.



Chapter 17

Flight Through the Rain



The night still had teeth, and it ground them. We ran hand in hand across the wet sand, and every step sent a small tremor into the storm, as if two pairs of human feet could command the coast to keep still. The rain did not fall from above; it came from everywhere, as though the air were full of tiny doors all opening at once.

Lucien's fingers were cold and yet familiar—salt on skin, a tremor not entirely from the chill. Above us, lightning tore the sky open, a white fissure through which, for a heartbeat, one could glimpse the breath of the world.

“Don't look back,” I said, my voice barely more than the shadow of a word. Séraphine's warning lay on my tongue like a coin: answers later, not now. Behind us came

barking shouts, like dogs that had learned to sound human. Torches nodded in the distance, yellowish, angry, and against the black sky they looked like mistakes someone had made on purpose.

The path began where the bay became an ear. We climbed the first dunes, heavy with rain like old blankets. Grass wound around our ankles, blades that felt as though they wanted to hold us. Shells crunched under the sand, and for a moment I thought of the three in Séraphine's bowl, how they vibrated when you spoke the name of the binding. The word was still on my tongue—Salt Vow—but I kept it there, cool, so it wouldn't burn me.

"Left," Lucien said, his voice like it came from a time when people still learned how to pronounce direction. I followed his pull. A bolt slashed across the sea, and in its gasping light I saw that the dune's slope had a narrow, dark cut: a cattle pass, half devoured by the storm. We slid through. The sand gave way, then held us, as if insulted by the thought of letting go.

The torches were closer now, but the sea roared louder. Tonight it had a new grammar: short, hard sentences that ended without a period. Once, I thought I heard my name in the thunder. I pressed my teeth together. "Later," I told the air, so softly only my heart heard it. Lucien squeezed my hand. Whether he understood me or the sea—I didn't know which I preferred.

The path bent past the first tongues of rock. Salt lay white on the stone like weariness. I felt the wind try to push between us and held tighter. "Stay," I whispered, not knowing if I meant him, myself, or the unseen hand I had felt the night before. Lightning answered, unfriendly, officious, and its light showed us the whole coast for a second, as if it were a torn piece of paper: cliffs bracing their shoulders, foam like hastily written letters no one

was allowed to read.

"There are more than yesterday," I panted.

"There are fewer than tomorrow," Lucien replied. "Run."

We ran. Water splashed to our thighs where the path sagged too deep. On a ledge I nearly caught my foot; an old iron ring jutted from the rock, the remnant of a promise. Lucien pulled me past it. No metal, I remembered Séraphine's words. The Depth likes it, but it does not trust it. I laughed briefly, a thin, wet sound, and the wind took it from my mouth.

"There—the drop in the channel. Keep to the slope."

"To where?"

"To the path. To the old bridge."

The old bridge. The thought was like a stone in my shoe: too small to stop for, too big to forget. I had seen it as a child, somewhere between two summers when the villagers repainted their stories. They said it was built when the coast decided it no longer wanted to end in the same place as the week before. Since then it had stood waiting—for what, no one knew.

Another flash—greenish this time, as if there were seaweed in the electricity. It cut us a way. For the beat of a breath I saw the path clearly: a dark seam on the slope leading to the bridge, and beyond it something else, a silhouette I didn't want to name. "Go on," I said, more to myself than to him.

I heard voices behind us now, truly, not only in my head. A name flew through the rain, but it wasn't mine. It was the other. I felt the hand on mine wanting to change direction—not backward, not forward, but downward toward the water, as if an answer waited there that was quicker. "No," I said sharply, dragging him up the slope.

“Not today. Not now.”

He stumbled, caught himself, breathed once as though it were the world taking air again. “Good,” he murmured, his tone older than the storm. “Then I’ll trust you.”

I understood he wasn’t praising me, but the in-between *Séraphine* had spoken of: the air deciding who it would hold tonight.

We reached the first break in the rock. Here the path was only a thought, a line on the wall. Above us a crooked pine hung, its roots in the air like veins. I felt my way, Lucien leading, and once he laid his palm flat on the stone, as if whispering something into its ear. The rain made everything smooth, even fear.

“You’re trembling,” he said.

“I’m not cold.”

“I know.”

I laughed, and it almost sounded like a promise. A bolt struck so close I saw the spray try to hold it for a heartbeat, then let it go, offended that it belonged to no one.

The path closed in tighter and tighter, and the coast played the old, bad role of a stern aunt: You don’t go further here. You turn back. We did neither. The wind grew stubborn; it no longer shifted, it shoved. Sometimes I felt it came from the ground, not the sea, as if the earth itself wanted to balance us.

“A bit more,” Lucien said. “Just to the bend.”

I hoped he was right, and at the same time I hoped he was wrong, because each just meant something unknown tonight. In my left ear the humming returned, like a bee made of light, and I held the seagrass knot in my other hand so each would have something to do: one, him; the

other, me. If you are my breath, stay, I had whispered yesterday. Today he didn't answer. Maybe silence was his way of running.

The sea spoke to us—not in words, but in movements. Sometimes it shoved the waves in great, hulking shoulders against the rocks; sometimes it sent them creeping in quick, thin fingers into the cracks. Once I thought I heard it laugh, and that frightened me. Another time it sounded like a prayer, and that frightened me more. Over all hung the smell of iron, as if a smithy had rented the night.

We rounded the bend. The lightning chose its moment well—or badly—and in its sharp white glare she stood before us: the bridge. Not an arch of stone, as I'd painted in memory, but a row of old planks on two beams driven into the rock, narrow as a hesitant gesture. Beneath lay the gorge, no river, only air flowing cold from the cliffs as if it were water yearning to fall.

"It holds," Lucien said. It sounded like a prayer.

"It holds," I echoed, my voice too questioning.

The torches were closer now, much closer. Their flames leapt as if they had legs. I heard someone call my name, truly this time, without thunder. "Later," I said, and it was hard, because part of me wanted to answer Now. Now, while my name sounded so tender. Now, while it held me. But Séraphine had said: If something calls you that sounds like you but isn't, don't answer. I bit the inside of my cheek until the taste of iron drowned everything else.

"I go first," I said before he could.

"No." He shook his head, water spraying from his hair like tiny sparks. "If a board breaks, I have to pull you back."

"And if you fall?"

He smiled, and I hated the tenderness with which he could. "Then you won't."

"You're unbearable," I whispered.

"You love me," he whispered back, so calmly the storm set the word aside like a shell to find later. Then he stepped onto the first plank.

I gripped the knot harder. The board groaned. Nothing gave. Lucien went on. I watched how he set his feet at an angle, knees soft, body leaning forward as if speaking to the air. Five steps. Six. He was in the middle when lightning drew him in the hardest white the world knew—so white I no longer saw his outline, only what the darkness remembered of him.

"Come," he called, and his face was there again, not white but alive.

I stepped onto the first plank. It didn't feel like wood, but like a hand not yet convinced. I went. He didn't come toward me, he stayed and kept his arms open, not as a goal but as a shore. Three steps. Four. On the fifth something creaked—not under me, but to the side, where the next would come.

"Don't stop," he said softly.

"I'm not stopping," I answered, though every muscle in me screamed to freeze. I went on. One board was softer than the rest, it yielded, and I felt it smile at me wickedly. I stepped over it, didn't look down, only at his hands, still open. When I reached him, I didn't take them. I should have. I couldn't. I went past him, two more planks, and then I was on the other side so suddenly I felt dizzy.

"Now you," I said, my voice unbroken. He nodded, lifted his foot. That's when I heard the first steps reach the bridge behind us—heavier, faster than ours. Torchlight fell across the planks, and they looked suddenly old, very

old, as though the light had given them their years back.

Lucien crossed. On his third step something cracked—not his plank, the one beside it. Wood bent but didn't snap. He sped up, just enough that the wind couldn't shove him. Then he was almost with me, two steps away, and that's when a board gave way—not under him, but under a hand reaching for him. A startled cry, a short ugly sound, and then the wet, dull ending of a mistake. I held my breath, my body behaving as though I were suddenly only skin around air.

“Go,” he said.

He took the last step. We were both on the safe side—and safe was a word to be handled carefully tonight. The torches stood on the far side. I saw faces in their light—too many, too familiar—and yet none. One of them called the names one calls when believing oneself in the right. I could have answered. I didn't. I took Lucien's hand, and we ran.

The path leveled out, skirting a hedge thrashing in the storm like an animal. Beyond lay a field that had never needed seawater, and yet smelled of it tonight. I stumbled, and he held me—not hard, not soft, just enough to keep me from falling. “A bit more,” he said, and it no longer sounded like a lie.

“To where?”

“To where you can see the bay.” He tilted his chin. A toothless hill rose in the dark, and behind it something the storm licked clean like a back. I guessed it and dared not think it.

The hill carried us, willing or not. The rain no longer slanted; it fell in hard vertical strands, as if the sky had made a decision. The higher we climbed, the louder the wind. It no longer needed a stage—it was the stage. My

hair clung to my face, and I tasted salt and something bitter, smelling of metal and birch bark. The land had voices everywhere: the clatter of a loose gate, the whistle of a gap beneath a door, the whimper of a roof suddenly remembering it was only boards.

“More?” Lucien’s breath hung in the air like cloud, though it was too warm for that. I knew it was only the lightning cutting our bodies from the drops.

“More,” I said.

We reached the crest. Suddenly there was space, too much space, and the wind tore it from our limbs, breaking us into sounds. The bay lay beneath us like an open hand that did not promise to catch us. A bolt struck the sea, and for a moment a tree of light stood there, gnarled and old, bending before it vanished. In its afterimage I saw the outline of the old tower—not the one my father cleaned the glass in, but the one forgotten. It crouched at the end of the headland like an old thought no one dared to speak aloud.

“There?” I asked.

“There,” he said.

We ran along the edge. The path was now only will. To the left the land dropped into the bay, foaming, furious, spitting sparks as if there were nails in the water. To the right it rose in dark, stubborn steps, with thorn that broke the wind into barbs. The knot in my hand was as wet as a living creature. My fingers ached. I held tighter.

“If you’re tired...” Lucien began.

“I am tired,” I said. “And I’m going.”

He nodded. “That’s the right way.”

Behind us, voices surged now, reckless, unwise, torch-marked silhouettes at the height of the bridge. Some had

chosen the field's way, others tried the planks. I heard wood answer something it didn't like. A command tore at the air, and at the same moment thunder replied as if it had finally found an equal opponent. Some shadows stayed behind. Some didn't. I didn't turn my head. I had long since learned that looking back didn't shorten the distance.

Before us the path sank into a hollow where water lay like a bad secret. We waded through. My shoes clung, then let go, and I thought of the sandbar that pretended to carry you. Another bolt—this one far to the right, over the headland—showed us a fence of split posts, behind them hay in black swathes. Beyond that, thin as a breath, the line of an old way leading to the tower.

"Look," Lucien said. "The lightning points."

"It points for everyone," I replied, and he smiled because it was true, and yet not the whole truth.

We climbed over the fence. A post broke and I fell to my knees, pain so clear the rest of the world blurred. He lifted me, his hands on my arms, steady but not demanding. "I can," I said all the same. "I can."

"I know."

The field beyond was no longer a field; the rain had made it a riverbed. We set our steps to the rhythm of the drops, and each time I thought I couldn't go on, lightning struck somewhere, showing—whether for us or only for me—a line to follow: a white seam in the sky, a path drawn for a heartbeat. I thought, not for the first time, that the sky wasn't only crying; it was helping. Not out of love. Out of order.

The last meters to the tower were along a ridge. The sea lay foaming and enraged to our left, the slope clinging with scrub to our right. Lucien paused, raised a hand, and

I heard it too: no calls, no torches, only wind. The path was clear. Perhaps the others had chosen another way. Perhaps the storm had decided who got which road tonight.

“When we’re there,” he said, “we don’t stay in the open. Only in the doorway. No further. Promise.”

“Why?”

“Because walls make the wind listen.”

I didn’t understand, and I understood completely. “I promise,” I said.

We ran the last steps, carved long ago into the rock when feet were heavier. They were smooth, but loyal. The gate of the old tower was only a frame; the door itself the sky had long since taken. The stone shone as if oiled. I stepped first onto the threshold. The sound of the rain changed—hollow, voiceless, as if falling on an old cloth.

“Only here,” Lucien warned, and we stood in the frame, the wind before us like a tongue unsure whom it wanted to taste. The inside smelled of cold ash and old oil, of stories that had pushed each other out of their sentences. I felt the warmth of his body reach my back, knowing how close we were without turning.

“Later,” I said, not knowing to whom.

A bolt lit the inside for a moment. Dust threads shone like glass webs. Then darkness again, and only the muffled sound of the sea remained, as though the tower had given it rules.

I breathed. My heart walked in a new rhythm invented for this night alone. “We’re here,” I said.

“We’re here,” he echoed.

The next light came not from the sky. It came from the

right, from the direction of the ridge. Not torchlight—a short, hard spark, as if metal had struck stone. I spun too fast, too sharply, and the promise not to look back slipped from my hand, but it was already too late: lightning—real this time, not sparks—tore the clouds, and in the white-blue glare, framed in the doorway of the abandoned lighthouse, stood a figure so clear, so near, that my breath folded inside me like a wet cloth: Adrien.



Chapter 18 **The Night of Wrath**



The lightning struck the world into white silence, and in the next breath there was the roaring again, the pulling, the lashing darkness. I ran. The path to the old lighthouse was a wet line across black rock, and the wind caught at my hair as if it meant to drag me back. Behind me came footsteps, ahead of me the flash of a coat in the rain, and in the distance, between the jagged teeth of the cliffs and the curved slash of the bay, the tower rose like a bare bone against the sky: blind, abandoned, but not dead.

„Lucien!“, I called, and the sea carried my cry away like a drop into its insatiable throat.

He turned only once. The light of the lightning swept

across his face, etched the sharpness of his cheekbones, the wetness of his lashes. He looked like someone already standing in farewell, and the knife of that glance cut straight through my gut. Then darkness again, shadowed gusts, his stride quickening, my breath burning.

At the foot of the tower, the door hung crooked in its frame. It sagged like a tired eyelid, swollen with salt, and each time a gust found its weight it groaned deep like an animal. Lucien pushed it open with the back of his hand, and the rain poured into the arched entrance. Inside smelled of old stone, moss, and the rust of years. A spiral of steps unfurled along the wall. He vanished into it, a shadow against the masonry.

I stepped over the threshold – and froze. Something was different here: the rush of the storm seemed not only outside, but inside the walls; the stones themselves vibrated with a heartbeat of their own. A drop ran from my forehead over my nose, broke on the rim of my lips, tasted of salt. I laid my palm to the cold wall. It was as though somewhere deep in the tower a breath was being drawn.

„Heroine!“

The voice cut in from outside, deeper than thunder, and in it lay a sharpness that would have made me flinch even as a child – not because it threatened, but because it demanded more than anyone could give. I turned. Adrien stood in the frame of the night, rain-plastered hair to his brow, the torch in his right hand, the sooty glow reddening his face. Across his left cheek, up to the ear, the lightning had struck a handful of welts into his thoughts. At his feet the water raged like a beast trying in vain to seize the rock.

„Don't go in,“ he called. „Not yet.“

„He's up there,“ I said. My own voice sounded strange to

my ears, as though another were speaking through me.
„You know he’s here. You knew it before he left.“

Adrien stepped across the threshold. The door slammed shut. Wind pressed us tighter into the space. Part of me thought that this tower had never been built for us, but for something larger than the three of us; something that only tolerated us. The torch burned despite the draught, as if it had a will of its own. Adrien lifted it, his gaze brushed over my mouth, my chin, my neck, searching for something – perhaps a reason to stop me, or a reason to let me go. In his eyes the storm was mirrored, not as weather, but as decision.

„Heroine,“ he said more quietly, „he’ll take you if you don’t stop him. And if I don’t stop him, he’ll take you anyway.“

„The sea takes no one who doesn’t already live in it,“ I replied. The words came from a depth I did not know, and yet they were mine. „Let me go first.“

„No.“ Adrien stepped closer, too close, and the smoke of the torch laid a bitter film on my tongue. „Not today. You defended him when he said nothing. Now he’s going to speak. To me.“

There were moments in Adrien’s face when his features became so still they covered everything, like snow falling over a field. Then you couldn’t see the grass beneath, the uneven ground, the molehills. You saw only the even white. That was how he looked now. I knew that beneath, a trapdoor was swinging, and if it opened he would fall through himself into something he wouldn’t name. I wanted to hold him, to set my hand to his back where he was warm despite the rain. I didn’t.

„Then go,“ I said, and my hand sank back to my side.
„But don’t speak with your fists.“

He smiled briefly, without joy. „I'll speak. And if words aren't enough, the wind will speak.“

I thought of Lucien's hands, of the silence they had made in me like a wide road where one could walk without haste. I thought of Adrien's hands, of their work with rope, the firm knots they tied, and of the steadiness that was as certain as stone. Between these hands I stood, and the tower breathed.

We began to climb.

The steps were slick, filmed with fine algae, as if on its highest days the sea had reached out its tongue to taste them. The shaft above was black as a gullet, yet in its darkness pulsed a grey flicker, as though clouds were changing places somewhere higher up. The wind rode up our backs. Rain came through cracks in threads that reached for us like cold feelers. The tower groaned, and each groan was a sentence in a language I understood with my belly.

„Lucien!“, Adrien called upward. „We're here.“

Echo, and then nothing. Only the steady drum of the storm against the stone.

We reached the first landing. A hatch gaped, hung on a chain that whined with salt. Adrien lifted the torch, and for a moment its shadow split my face in two. On the floor lay something dark, sunken cloth – a coat. I recognised the seam at the shoulder I had mended with coarse thread. My heart gave a small leap that hurt. Yes, he was here. Not far.

„He's not running from us,“ Adrien said. „He doesn't run from anyone. He only runs from the word that binds him.“

„What word?“, I asked.

„Guilt,“ Adrien said, and the sound of his voice made the chain at the hatch give a faint snap.

I lifted the coat. It was heavy with water, cold. The fabric smelled of him, only diluted – salt, night, the faintest hint of something metallic. I pressed it to me. A brief, faithful ache made me clench my teeth. I laid the coat over the railing; drops ran down the bars in long lines, drawing veins on bare iron.

We climbed on. The second landing offered nothing but a window through which a thin stripe of rain blew, turning to dust in the air. Outside the bay rose, a black snorting. I saw the village only in outline, dotted with lamps dying against the wet. Another flash, and for a heartbeat it was all so bright I could not think of depth. I blinked. Darkness returned, denser, clumpier. My body knew the way before my head did. I went, placed, climbed.

On the third landing he stood. Not all the way up, not all the way down, in a place so much between that it fitted him like a second skin. Lucien held his hand to the railing, fingers splayed as if listening to the drops running over the bars. He was bareheaded in the rain that drifted through the window gap; his hair clung to his temple. He looked as if he had just come from the sea and it had only spat him out on a whim, ready to take him back when it pleased.

„Adrien,“ he said, calm, with the kind of calm that comes when one knows something unavoidable is beginning.

„And you, Heroine.“

„Speak,“ Adrien burst out. „Speak before I silence you.“

Lucien looked at him, long. „I have never been silent. You did not listen.“

„I heard that a ship burned, and you came back alone,“ Adrien said. „I heard you have hands like cold. I heard

they call to you when the sea rises, and that you go, like a man going home. And I saw you kiss her.“ He pointed at me, not roughly, but with precision, and the torch cast a red shimmer along his extended arm. „I need no more. Speak.“

Lucien let his hand fall from the railing. He took a step toward us, then stopped, as though sensing the current radiating from Adrien. I heard my own heartbeat, sharp, and behind it the deep, enduring mutter of the sea. The wind climbed the stair like a messenger late for his errand and eager to spill words.

„The sea takes whom it loves,“ Lucien said softly.
„Sometimes it gives back those it loves more than it dares admit.“

Adrien laughed briefly, without joy. „In riddles, as always. I don’t want to be your myth, Lucien. I want to be your reason. Tell me what you’ve done.“

„I have lived,“ Lucien said. „And in doing so, died.“

„Enough.“ Adrien’s arm twitched, as though to tear something from the stone. „Tell me what you mean to do with her.“

I stepped between them, not much, only a pace.

„Nothing is done with me,“ I said. „I do.“

Adrien looked at me. In that gaze lay something that had once asked and received no answer. „Then do it now,“ he said, „and step aside.“

„No,“ I said.

He lifted the torch higher, and its light flickered across Lucien’s face, over lips gleaming with water, over the shadow on his neck. Something in me wanted to reach out and touch that shadow, as if I could banish the darkness with warmth. Something in me wanted to seize

Adrien by the wrist, firmly, and pull him back into a space that was not yet so tight. I did neither.

The tower groaned. From above came a jolt, as though a heavy hatch had fallen into place. The torchlight wavered. I felt the wind twisting in the crown of the building, as if it were a body writhing in anger. I thought: In a moment a gust will come that rips every door open. And then it did.

A cry, half wind, half human, and the door at the base of the lantern flew wide. Air surged down the stair like icy fingers. I pressed myself to the inner wall, and in that pressing was also the urging of my thoughts: now. Now, or whatever owns us will take us.

Adrien lunged forward so quickly I saw only the flaring shadow his arm cast and the torch he held up to the wind like a knife. „What are you,“ he hissed, „if not a man?“

„I am human,“ Lucien said, „until the deep draws breath.“

„And then?“

„Then I am the one who calls it.“

It was a sentence like a stone dropped into a well. I heard it fall, long, too long, until it made no sound. I felt Adrien stiffen. And then, at last, something moved that was no longer words.

Adrien leapt.

They met in the middle of the landing, where the narrow space pressed bodies closer than was wise. Adrien slammed Lucien's shoulder against the railing; the iron groaned, and a halo of drops leapt into the air like bright gravel. Lucien held his ground, not hard but yielding, his body giving way and returning again, as if he knew more of currents than of blows. I saw hands, fists, flashing in

the torchlight; I heard the dull thud of skin on cloth, on muscle. It was not a practiced fight; it was one fought from the belly, and bellies know no technique, only need.

„Stop!“, I cried, but the wind stole the syllables from my mouth. The torch bent, the flame swerved aside as if to duck. A blow struck Lucien's cheek, and the red of the glow lay on his skin like a bloom. He stepped back, one pace, two, his breath visible in tiny clouds, if not for the rain swallowing each one.

Adrien followed, driving him on. „You call the deep?“, he shouted. „Who did you call when the ship burned? Who did you call when you lay in the water and the sky was black like a shroud before God's face?“

Lucien raised his arms, not to strike, more to turn the next thrust aside. „I called for life,“ he said, „and the price was death.“

„Whose death?“, Adrien. His voice was raw, flung back by the walls and returned as an echo-blow to my spine. He shoved Lucien hard against the railing. The iron sang. „Mine,“ said Lucien.

Adrien froze. Only for a heartbeat. In that heartbeat I heard something in him falter. Then it fell back into place, and that place was hard. „Don't lie to me.“

„I am not lying to you,“ Lucien answered. „I die every time the sea takes. And I live every time it gives. What I am, I am only in that exchange. I didn't want it. I didn't choose it when I still could. Now I choose by staying – or going.“

„And her?“ Adrien pointed at me. „Does she choose? Or do you choose for her?“

„I have never chosen for her,“ said Lucien, and there was something in his voice that caught me under the ribs.

„She chose me when the air between us grew thin and the sea went still.“

I stepped closer. The torch was almost at head height now; I felt its heat in the rain. „I still choose,“ I said, and I knew that wasn't quite true; the truth was that the choosing in me had begun long ago without asking me, and I was only trying to catch up. „But I don't choose in blows.“

Adrien turned his head toward me, and in that turn was such weariness it hurt me. „I didn't want to hit you,“ he said, and a small, ugly sound broke in his throat. „I wanted to hit him because I can't hit you. And because I can't hit the sea.“

„Then hit me,“ Lucien said quietly, opening his hands wide. „Hit me, if that's what your hands must do. But listen while you do it.“

Adrien spun, a slash of dark force, and his fist struck Lucien in the chest. Air left him with a dry, hollow sound, like pressing a bladder. He reeled against the railing, the bars scraping his shoulder blade. His fingers found the edge, clutched. I moved, but Adrien was nearer, and his hand was there like rope.

„Speak,“ he said, and his voice was again that blade that doesn't bleed, only parts. „Speak of guilt, if you dare.“

Lucien breathed once, twice, as if seeking air that wasn't here. „I bear the curse of a man who thought he was stronger than water,“ he said at last. „I didn't ask for it; he gave it to me as he died. I can't strip it off. I tried to stay on land. I tried to be human. But when the deep calls, I am a crack in the ground through which water sings.“

„That's not speaking,“ Adrien ground out. „That's poetry. I need your blood, not your pictures.“

Something rose in me, like fear, but it didn't smell of fear

– more of cold soot and wet hemp. I saw how they held each other without holding: Adrien with the rage that comes from love; Lucien with the calm that comes from knowing. Between them the torch threw tiny sparks that, given time, might have become words.

„Adrien,“ I said, and I knew I spoke his name not as a call but as a plea. „He didn’t force me. He looked at me. I saw myself, and I went to me.“

„And I?“, Adrien asked, and there it was: the child in his voice, lying under the snow. „Am I no one? Am I only duties and a good name? Am I the coastal wind that dries everything wet and is allowed to drink nothing?“

„You are the one I can lean on,“ I said. „And you are the one I couldn’t love because I couldn’t.“

He flinched as if I’d struck him. „Couldn’t love,“ he repeated slowly, each word a pebble in the mouth. „How convenient.“

„I never lied to you,“ I said. „I just didn’t say all I felt, because I didn’t know it before it was there. And when it was there, it wasn’t small, Adrien. It was so big the sea went quiet.“

The tower answered: a bang somewhere above, as if the hatch jumped against its frame. The wind laughed, a wild, toothy laugh. I saw the rain come now in surges, as if a hand were letting it loose.

Adrien let his shoulder drop, only a fraction. Lucien’s fingers left the railing. It was as if someone had struck the beat in a music only we three heard. Then they moved again – not like men wanting to break each other, but like men wanting to understand each other without knowing how, and yet too hard for gentleness.

Adrien grabbed Lucien’s coat – no, not coat, that hung below on the railing; he seized the shirt at his chest, rain-

glued to his skin. The fabric gave, frayed, tore with a sound like striking an old string. Lucien's skin gleamed pale, and across it, diagonal over the collarbone, ran a fine line, pale as a scar thread. I had seen it once, in the half-light of the cave, soft and warm under my lips. Now it stood hard, and the wind traced over it like over a sign.

„What's that?“, Adrien asked hoarsely. „Whose claw marked you?“

„No animal's,“ said Lucien. „A promise.“

„An oath?“, Adrien spat the word. „To whom?“

„To the one who takes me when I call. To the one who lets me go when I'm silent.“

„The sea has no ears,“ Adrien's hand lifted. „And no hands.“

„Perhaps not,“ said Lucien. „But it has me.“

Adrien struck. Lucien half parried; the blow glanced off his cheek, skimmed his ear, caught his neck, a dull, sick sound. Lucien stumbled, his heel slipping on wet stone. I gasped. The space tilted. For a breath I saw him fall – not truly, but in that future only a foot away when you fight on stairs. His hand found nothing. His hip hit the railing. The iron bleated. Then he was back in the centre, and Adrien loomed over him like light over water.

I could watch no more. My body did something before I thought. I was between them, my hand on Adrien's chest where his heart was, warm, pounding hard. „Not like this,“ I said.

„How then?“, he asked. The rain ran down his cheeks, mingling with something else I didn't name. „How then, Heroine? Tell me and I'll do it. Tell me.“

„Listen,“ I said. „Listen while you strike, if you must. Listen.“

Lucien straightened, rubbed his cheek. He nodded. „I want to speak,“ he said. „And if I can’t find the words, I’ll show you what language can’t hold.“

Adrien breathed through his nose. „Speak.“

Lucien lifted his gaze. Something shifted in his eyes – the soft, dark depth swelled, and I had the feeling one could look into them as into a well where old coins glinted.

„That night,“ he said, „when the ship burned, I called. I called because I still wanted to breathe. I called because they screamed. And the deep answered. Not with mercy. With a bargain.“

„A bargain,“ Adrien repeated, dry.

„My breath for theirs,“ said Lucien. „My years for their hours. My heart for their bodies. It’s always been so since that night. I belong twice. And every time it takes me, it gives me back – slimmer, colder, with more water in my bones. I’ve tried not to learn names. I’ve tried to forget myself. Then she came.“ He looked at me, and in his gaze lay everything I both wanted and feared. „And the sea went still.“

It sounded like an explanation. It also sounded like a threat, but not from him, rather from what came with him. Adrien took his hand from my arm. He stepped back. „And what do you want here, in this tower?“, he asked. „What do you want with her?“

„I don’t want to take her,“ said Lucien. „I want to ask her.“

Adrien laughed, this time with a sound that rose like sparks in the stairwell. „Ask? Before me? Before the wind? You want to ask her to go with you – into what no human knows?“

„No,“ said Lucien. „I want to ask her to stay – with herself. To stay if I go.“ He breathed. „And if she doesn’t

want to stay, I want to hear if she wants the sea.“

Adrien gripped the railing as if he needed its steadiness. The torch in his hand was a small, defiantly burning star. „So you want to force her to say what she loves.“

„I force no one,“ said Lucien. „I can only ask. The storm asks too. And the sea waits.“

I thought: It's far too late to be simple. But not too late to speak. „I will go up with you,“ I said, „and there I will speak. But I want you to stop hitting each other first.“

Adrien looked at Lucien. Lucien looked at Adrien. Two kinds of darkness recognising each other. Finally Adrien nodded, curtly, in a way that told me it hurt him. Lucien nodded too, slower, as if in that nod he saw an oath.

„Good,“ I said. I laid two fingers on the railing, felt the cold run of water. „Then let's go.“

We climbed. Once I stumbled, and Adrien's hand was there, at my elbow, firm. Once I stopped, dizzy from the turning, and Lucien's hand was there at my ribs, barely a touch, only warmth. We said nothing. Above us the wind wailed like a violin strung too tight. The tower sang a song of nails and water.

The stair widened, the shaft grew lighter – not because the night willed it, but because above, the lantern was open and the storm itself was making light. The space at my sides grew, and with it grew the kind of fear that sits in the nape like a cold animal: fear of height, of edge, of the wrong step.

Then we were there.

The lantern room stood as if hung on the sky. Glass was missing – panes burst in storms long past, and what was left of the light chamber let rain drift in in fine veils. The old lens stood like a vast, pale eye, blinded by salt and

years. The room was narrow; a thin ledge ran around the lens, with a railing that didn't hide its rust. The door to the outside hung open, gnawed by gusts. Beyond it was the gallery, the outer walk, and beyond the walk: nothing but wind and drop.

I stepped carefully to the lens. Adrien set the torch in a holder that looked as if it had waited decades for just this flame. Lucien stayed in the doorway to the stair, the rain darkening his shoulders. The three of us were in this circle, and the circle was a mouth about to speak.

„Speak now,“ Adrien said, and his voice was quieter, not out of pity, but out of respect for whatever spoke here when we were silent.

I laid my hand on the glass. It felt like a forehead that had long had fever and was now still warm but no longer burning. „I love you both,“ I said, and the word fell into me as though I were holding onto it only in the fall. „I love you, Adrien. And I love you, Lucien. But not the same. Not in the same way. Not with the same ending.“

I heard Adrien draw breath, and I heard Lucien let it go. I did not look at them. You cannot speak when you have to look both in the eye.

„Adrien,“ I went on, „you are the one who holds me to land. You are the dry wood I can sleep on when I'm tired. You are the morning that always comes, even when the night was long. With you life would be a harbour. I know how that feels. I know how it smells and sounds and how the days turn. I know I could grow old beside you, and our hands would tie knots the years could hold. I know I've hurt you.“ I turned to him at last. „And I know your love doesn't die because I know it. That is your courage.“

He looked at me, and something in his face grew soft with that softness that is not weakness, but strength shifting its weight.

„Lucien,“ I said, and my mouth tasted of salt, „you are not the harbour. You are the water that surrounds it. You are the breath between two storms. With you nothing grows old, because nothing stays without also returning. You are not safe. You are true. That is your courage. I don't know how to live in truth without breaking. But I know that when you looked at me, I stopped being afraid.“

The wind stepped into the room like a guest unused to doors. The torch bent. The rain wrapped itself around my ankles. I felt suddenly very warm and very cold, as if my body were a house through which both fire and water passed.

„Where do you want to go?“, Adrien asked. He said it as if it were three words, and not a complaint and an accusation and a plea.

„I want to listen,“ I said. „I want to go where it calls me. And I want to stay where I am. I want two things that cannot both be. I must let one go.“

„Which?“, Adrien.

„I'll say,“ I said, „when I know.“

„And when will you know?“

„When the storm brings the sea-light,“ I said without knowing I would. „When the tower shines again, not with fire, but with what it forgot.“

They were both silent. The tower breathed. Outside the sea struck the cliffs, and for the first time I heard not only its noise, I heard its sentence: Come.

Adrien stepped to the railing, looking out. The torch stood behind him, and in its glow I saw the lines of his neck, the veins that had risen in anger and were now only watchful. Lucien moved from the doorframe toward the

lens, and his reflection in it was strangely distorted – as if he were already half water, half air. I stood between them and knew: If one fell, I would fall with him. And yet I stood.

„There’s something we haven’t said,“ Adrien said without turning. „And it must be said before you... choose.“ He caught on the word as if a noose hung from it. „I followed you, Lucien, not because I hate you, but because I can’t bear myself when I stand aside while you do something I don’t understand. I’m not a man of the misunderstood. I want to know what I’m drowning in. If I drown.“

„One doesn’t drown in understanding,“ Lucien said.
„One drowns in pride.“

Adrien laughed softly, a rough, beautiful laugh. „Then hear me proud now: I won’t hold her if she wants the water. I won’t push her if she stays. But I will hold your arm if you pull her before she speaks.“

„I pull no one,“ Lucien replied. „I am the pull. The sea is the arm.“

„And I am the knot,“ said Adrien. „If I must.“

„If you must,“ said Lucien.

I breathed. Then everything happened at once—

A blow, so near that the floor beneath my feet turned soft for a moment. The door to the gallery flew open as though someone had run against it. Wind burst into the room, seized the torch – no longer a heroine now, only fire – and hurled it against the lens. A dirty spark drew a brown scratch across the glass. The flame went out, but the room shone brighter, for outside, over the sea, a vein in the sky split, and light poured from it in streams. For one heartbeat I saw everything: the drops like glass beads in the air; the edges of the railing, sharp as salt; Lucien’s

eyes, too wide, too dark; Adrien's hand rising before I knew for what.

Then there was only wind.

The gust struck us from the side. I stumbled onto the gallery. My shoe slid on wet metal. I grabbed the post. It was as though a cold tongue held me. Adrien turned, and his hand clamped around my wrist, firm, warmer than anything in this room. Lucien was behind him, and in the press of the wind their movements seemed slowed, as if they moved through heavy water.

A second gust came. I heard its step before it was there, the way you know a person's step. It caught the door, tore it wider, and the door slammed against the stop. A piece of wood splintered off, flew through the room, struck the lens, lit it once more. Beneath our feet the metal ring of the gallery swung like a cradle.

Adrien held me. „Inside!“, he shouted. „Inside, Heroine!“

I meant to obey. At that moment the wind slammed the door again – or open, I don't know. It was as if it had a will of its own. The jolt knocked Lucien off balance. He reeled. For a heartbeat he stood free between space and fall, his back to the harbour, his face to the sea. I saw his fingers reach for hold. Yes, there was iron – but slippery, merciless. He didn't find it.

„Lucien!“, I screamed, and my scream was an animal.

Adrien whirled, let go of my wrist, leapt. His hand caught Lucien's sleeve, tore at it, found cloth that gave way, then skin. Their fingers hooked together, and suddenly there was a chain: the tower, with its railing, to it Adrien, to him Lucien, and at the end, small yet strong as a clamp, me. I seized Adrien, his jacket, his belt, anything my body could reach. I found him, and with me the tower.

We held. The wind wanted us, wanted him more than us,

and I felt it tear as if there were no bones. Lucien hung half outside, his legs seeking grip on the gallery that was no grip at all. I saw the rain in his lashes, like small, trembling lights.

„Let go,“ he said, calm, as though pain pleased him. „Let me.“

„No,“ said Adrien, and his voice was no word, it was a rope. „No.“

I pressed harder into his back, felt the pull in my arms, and the world shrank to this: only hands, muscle, metal, breath, water. „Pull!“, I said, though they were both already pulling.

The wind laughed again. It passed through us, not over, and for the fraction of a moment I felt something I had never felt before: that the wind was not nature, but a decision. It decided against us – and then, just as suddenly, for us. It slackened. Only a little, but enough. Our arms found space. I set my foot against the post, pushed, pulled along, burned. Lucien’s shoulder rose over the edge. One last heave, one last furious sound from Adrien’s throat – and Lucien was inside. He fell onto the gallery, rolled onto his back, gasping. Adrien shoved the door to; it banged half-shut. I sank to my knees, laid my forehead on cold metal, and for a breath the world was still.

Then I laughed. It sounded like someone crying.

Lucien sat up. Blood trickled from a scrape on his temple. It mingled with rain, became rosy water. He looked at us, and in his eyes was – for the first time – thanks, so plain it tightened my throat again.

Adrien breathed hard. He looked at Lucien, long. „Next time,“ he said between breaths, „we fall together.“

„There is no next time,“ Lucien replied. „There is only

the time you fall. And the time you stay.“

Adrien nodded, blunt, as though knowing that in such bluntness lay his agreement.

I stood, unsteady. „Inside,“ I said softly. „Come. We’ll speak further there.“ I gestured toward the lens, toward the room with less wind. They followed. My legs were as soft as wet wood.

We stepped into the lantern room. The wind remained outside, not because we had shut it out, but because it had decided to leave us to ourselves for a moment. I felt my hands trembling. I set them on the old lens. Glass is hard, yet under my skin it felt soft, as if made to comfort foreheads.

„I’m not here to set you against each other,“ I said. „I’m here to hold myself. And I want you to help me.“

Adrien nodded. Lucien nodded. The sea nodded, in its way: it paused before its next blow.

„You said there’s a bargain,“ Adrien began. His voice was now a tool again, not a weapon. „If you call, it takes you. If you’re silent, it lets you. And if you breathe, someone pays.“

Lucien brushed the wet hair from his brow. „More or less,“ he said. „There are no contracts in ink. Only breath. I gave mine when the captain lost his that night. I took his last word and laid it on my tongue. It was a name. Not mine. Since then I hear it when the sea rises.“

„A name?“, I asked. „Whose?“

„The one who never arrived,“ Lucien said. „The one who was always already out there. A name that doesn’t belong on land.“

I didn’t understand, and yet I did. Some words are like shells: you pick them up because they’re beautiful, and

later you realise they make noise when you hold them to your ear. That was this name. I didn't need to know it to know it made noise.

„And today?“, Adrien said. „Why today? Why this tower?“

„Because this tower knows the language we've forgotten,“ Lucien answered. „It was built to speak light. When the light went silent, the language remained. It's in the stones. And the storm understands it.“

„What does it say?“, I asked.

„It says: Choose where the light lives.“ Lucien's gaze slid to the crown of the lens, where once the flame had stood. „Not below, where the path is narrow. Not outside, where the wind drags you. Here.“

Adrien stepped to the lens, laid his fingers on the cold glass. Our hands were no enemies now. „Then hear this,“ he said, without looking at Lucien. „If she goes, I don't follow. If she stays, you don't linger nearby waiting for her to fall. You go where you go and take your shadows with you. I can see you. I can't carry you.“

Lucien inclined his head. „I ask for no carrier.“

„Good.“ Adrien looked at him now. „And one more thing: If you fall again and I'm there, I'll hold you again. Not for you, but for her. That's no promise; it's what I am.“

Lucien nodded. „That's enough.“

I listened to them and thought I loved them because they stopped killing and started saying what they were. Love is often nothing else: being able to say what you are aloud without losing. I stepped back from the glass. The floor was wet under me, the air smelled of warm metal, of the spark that had just died. I lifted my eyes. Through the

open panes I saw the sky, torn open, and through the tears I saw a quiet, vicious blue you see only in the eyes of children and waves.

„I will go up,“ I said, and they both looked at me. „Onto the gallery. All the way outside. I'll stand where there's nothing between me and the sea but air. And I'll speak. If you can, be silent then. If you must, hold me.“

Adrien wanted to speak, held it back; his mouth stayed open, then closed. Lucien took a half-step, stopped as if knowing the next would bring him too close.

I went to the door. The wind lurked behind the wood like a cat. I took the handle. It was cold, the coldest thing here. I pressed, and the wind came in, not in a rush, but with a gentle push that surprised me. I stepped out.

The gallery was a narrow ring, slick as a fish's back. The railing was low; it felt like a bad idea. Beneath me the tower fell; beside me the night fell; above me the rain fell. Before me the sea lay, not as a surface, but as a body hurling itself. In the distance two lights pricked through, bored into the darkness like thorns, vanished, reappeared. Maybe boats. Maybe stars that had decided to hang lower.

I set both hands on the railing. The metal was rough with rust. It was like holding a story anyone can tell once they're old enough. I closed my eyes. I heard my breath, fast. I forced it slower. Then I spoke.

„Sea,“ I said simply. „I am Heroine of Marenveil. You know me. I barely know you. But I know you listened to me when I said nothing, only with my head on a windowsill. I know you were still when his hand touched me. I know you grew loud when my fear returned. I stand here because you called me, and because they called me. I can only go to one place. I don't want to lose what I can't keep. So tell me: If I go with you, who will I be when I come back? If I stay, what will you take from me?“

The wind held its breath. I swear it. And then the answer came. Not as a voice. As light.

It wasn't lightning. Nor was it torchlight. It was a gleam that came not from outside, but from the lens behind me, from the glass that saw my back. It was a cold, greenish light that neither froze nor burned, and yet cut through the rain as though someone had cleared a path through fog. It broke in the drops, turning them into tiny moons. It swept over the gallery, laid itself on my fingers, and suddenly I saw every ridge, every crust of salt, as if they were map lines.

„Adrien,“ I whispered. „Lucien.“

„I see it,“ said Adrien behind me, and his voice was no longer tool nor weapon. It was wonder.

„The sea-light,“ said Lucien, and his word was so soft it almost became a breath. „The tower speaks again.“

The light held. It trembled, yes, but it held, like breath holds. I let go of the railing, half turned to look in. In the lens stood something that couldn't be there: the memory of a flame that had never burned and yet gave light. I didn't know if it came from me, from them, from all three of us, or from the one who once died here and was now reconciled. I knew only: It was time.

„I won't be able to save you if you choose wrong,“ Adrien said softly.

„There is no wrong,“ said Lucien. „There is only an end and a beginning shaking hands.“

„You will hold me,“ I said. „As long as I'm still here.“

I stepped back to the balustrade, lifted my face into the rain. I thought of my father in the lighthouse of Marenveil, his silent hands on rusty wheels, the smell of oil and coffee in the dawn. I thought of the laughter of

girls at the harbour, drying their hair to coronas when the sun appeared. I thought of the cave, the salt taste on my tongue, a hand that held me when I said: „Yes.“ I thought of Adrien’s shoulders blocking my view of the storm, as if bones could protect the world. I thought of my room, the yellow cloth over the mirror, the red shoes I hid because red was too loud in Marenveil.

And then I thought of what would come if I said „come“. Of the cold that doesn’t kill. Of the singing that needs no words. Of the days when my body would be lighter and my heart heavier. Of the return that is always departure.

„Sea,“ I said again. „I love you. But I’m not yours. I am mine. So give me a sign that is mine.“

The light quivered. Then it turned, not away, but deeper into the lens. It was as though something drew back into the stone to stand firmer there. At the same time the sea rose. I saw a wave, higher than the ones a minute ago – I know you shouldn’t count minutes in storms, but I did – and on its back lay foam that wasn’t white but colourless, and in that colourlessness was a pattern so fine as if someone had laid a net over it. It looked like script. I couldn’t read it. Yet I knew: It was for me.

I heard a step behind me. Adrien? Lucien? I didn’t turn. I set my hand to the railing, and into me fell the decision – not like thunder, not like a knife, more like a door closing softly because someone was holding it.

„I will not go tonight,“ I said clearly. „Not now. Not into this night. I will stay. I will stand tomorrow when the light comes again that is not of storm. And if then I say ‚come‘, I’ll go. If I then say ‚stay‘, I’ll stay. Tonight I say only this: I choose with light, not with wrath.“

The storm listened. I felt it in how it didn’t shove me, didn’t pull me, only was.

„Good,“ said Adrien behind me, and it sounded as if he leaned on something he hadn't built himself.

„Good,“ said Lucien, and it sounded as if he laid something he'd carried down on the ground, gently.

I turned. The sea-light held, paler but sure. I stepped back into the room. My clothes clung to my knees. My hair clung to my neck. I was cold, and I was alive. I looked at the men. They looked at me.

„Tonight,“ I said, „we stay here. Not out of fear, but because this tower knows us. We leave only when the wind tires. Tomorrow we go down, each to his own path. And up on the roof, under the storm-light, I will speak.“

Adrien nodded. „I stay,“ he said – not for my sake, or yes, but not only. For his own too.

Lucien nodded. „I stay,“ he said – and this staying sounded different in his mouth than in the other's; it sounded as if he would have to explain it to the water.

We sat down. Yes, we sat in this room I'd never thought a place to sit. Adrien leaned his back against the lens, warm now from light that was no fire. Lucien sat opposite him, shoulders to the stone. I settled between them, not exactly in the middle, a little nearer to Adrien because I was cold, and his warmth was the kind that stayed. I stretched out my hand. Lucien laid his on it, without gripping, only resting. Adrien set his over it, firmer, as if tying a knot. It was a strange triangle, and yet it was our balance. The tower growled contentedly, or I imagined it did.

We were silent a while, and in that silence was more love than in a thousand sentences. Outside the sea struck. Inside, my breath mattered. I heard Adrien snort once in the half-sleep that wasn't sleep. I noticed Lucien's fingers twitch slightly, as if speaking with water.

At some point, I don't know when, our hands parted. I stood, went to the door, looked out. The storm was still there. But it was older now, since we had entered. I smiled into its folds.

„Tomorrow,“ I said into the night, „at the highest point.“

The wind took the word and set it aside carefully, as if knowing it would be needed tomorrow.

I turned back, went to the lens, set my forehead to the glass. It was warm inside and cool outside. I closed my eyes and saw something that was no image: a pinnacle, a light, two hands, my voice. I breathed. And with the breath came a sentence not yet spoken, but already on my tongue.

So I stood, between the men, between stone and water, and knew that the night of wrath would not be the night of decision. That would come in the morning.

And as the storm drew back to strike again and the tower nodded in time with the sea, I lifted my head, opened my eyes, and looked up: to where the narrow metal ladder led to the roof platform, a last, short, steep row of steps that ended in the open. I saw my hands on the rungs. I saw the morning up there, the one that wasn't yet. I saw the light that was no fire. And I heard my voice, calm and bright, as one has only when one no longer asks.

I turned to them, smiled, only a little, and said: „Come.“

We climb at dawn the final ladder, to where the wind whips our hair into banners and the sea breathes at our feet, and I lift my hand into the new light, ready to speak the vow that will bind me to the land – or to the sea.



Chapter 19

The Vow Under Storm-Light



Morning did not arrive quietly. It rose like a sharp blade from the night, slicing the fog into thin, pale ribbons and laying a faint light on the stone of the tower that felt like a touch too long delayed. Above the bay lingered the growl of the storm, deep and sluggish, as though it had drunk too much through the night and now staggered into the day. The wind smelled of metal and wet kelp; it had grown colder, keener, as if it had made a decision.

I stood at the foot of the last ladder leading up to the roof platform. Above me a loose piece of iron clinked in the wind, its rhythm joining the huff of the sea far below. My fingers rested on the first pair of rungs, yet I still paused. Behind me they stood – Adrien in the half-

shadow of the lens, hands in the pockets of his wet coat, Lucien in the doorway, his hair dishevelled and dark from the wind that swept down from above.

„It is time,“ Lucien said quietly. His voice did not fight the wind; it slid within it, like a gull that did not flap but only held its wings.

I looked at him. The night had left traces on his face – fine shadows beneath the eyes, a certain hardness in the cheekbones as if he had slept against an invisible edge. But his eyes were clear, and in them there was none of the restlessness I had so often seen – only expectation.

Adrien took a step closer, the floor crunching under his boot. „Whatever happens up there, Heroine—“ He broke off, searching, it seemed, for a word that did not sound like a chain. „...come back.“

„I will come back,“ I said, and we both knew we did not mean the same thing.

The first grip on the ladder was cold and rough. I felt the rust under my fingertips, the weight of years gnawed into each notch. Step by step I climbed, and with each step the sky grew larger, brighter, more relentless.

At the top there was no roof, only a narrow metal ring encircling the tower, and above it the whole sky, open like a book – every cloud a page, turned by the wind. The storm-light still hung in the air, pale green and veined with silver threads, as though someone had captured the northern lights and stretched them over the sea.

I stepped out. Beneath me the sea heaved, no longer in the furious blows of the night but in a steady, heavy motion, like a heart not yet decided whether to calm or to race again. The wind wrapped itself around me at once, ran beneath my wet dress, tugged at it like a hand testing whether I would hold.

Lucien followed me onto the platform. He did not come quickly, but with a calm that almost looked like hesitation. When he stood beside me, he placed both hands on the railing, leaned slightly forward, and for a moment he was so still I could have believed him made of the same material as the tower.

„Heroine,“ he began, without taking his eyes from the horizon, „I am not here to take you with me. I am here to let you go.“

Something in my chest tightened. „And if I don’t want that?“

He turned to me, and the wind carried the salt scent of his skin to me. „Then I will stay. But not in the way you think. I cannot stay as a man stays – with roots. I stay as the water stays: only to move again.“

I wanted to answer, but he raised a hand and set it on my shoulder. His gaze was steady, not pressing, yet not soft. „I have carried you in me since you pulled me from the surf. The sea recognised you in me long before I did. But I know now that love does not only mean taking what you want. It also means letting go of what you cannot hold without breaking it.“

The wind blew at us both, as if it wanted to scatter the words before they could take root. I laid my hand on his chest, felt the beat beneath – calm, even, almost too even for the sea that lived in him.

„And if I stay?“ I asked.

„Then,“ he said softly, „you do not stay for me, but for yourself. I will go, Heroine. Not for lack of love, but out of respect for yours.“

The words struck me harder than the wind. I did not want him to leave me, and yet... there was something in me that knew: this letting go might be the only way both

of us could survive – he in the water, I on land.

We stood like that, hand on heart, heart beneath hand, while the storm-light wrapped around us. Above, the sky lay torn open, the light within it trembling as if uncertain whether to remain or to flee.

Lucien did not lower his gaze. „Make your choice, Heroine. Today. Here.“

I drew a deep breath. The air tasted of salt, rain, and iron. Behind me the sea roared, before me stood the man I had pulled from the waves, and beneath my fingers his heart beat evenly, as if to tell me: What you do is yours.

I kept my hand upon his chest, as if by doing so I could feel not only his heartbeat but also the sea within him – that unseen current which had given him to me and at the same time always drawn him away. Rain slid between our fingers, mingled with the warmth of our skin, and for a moment I could not tell whether the trembling in me came from the wind or from the decision swelling inside me like a tide.

„You know that I love you,“ I said at last. My voice was scarcely more than a thread, and yet the wind did not carry it away. „But I have also learned that love is not the only compass. Sometimes it points exactly where one will go under.“

Lucien lowered his head, not in shame, but like a man recognising a song he himself had once sung. „I wanted you to choose me,“ he admitted. „But I did not think that the sea never asks whom it spares. And that it takes everything it is given – even you.“

A distant thunder rolled across the sky, heavy and sluggish. It was no longer a messenger of the night, but a reminder that the storm never wholly left. Above us the greenish light pulsed, now wrapping itself closer around

us, as if it had decided to listen to our words.

„When I pulled you from the surf that day,“ I continued, „I thought it was only the courage of a single moment. Today I know it was the beginning of a story larger than the two of us.“ I looked into his eyes, and there was no longer that dark, unfathomable water which had once captured me – there was now clarity, as still as a smooth sea. „But every story reaches a point where one chooses how it should end.“

He nodded slowly. „And you have reached yours.“

„Yes.“

The wind grew stronger, wound itself around us, tugged at my dress, played in his hair. The storm-light flickered as though breathing, and the sky drew its clouds tighter until only a narrow slit at the horizon remained – a strip so bright it almost hurt to look at.

I took a step back, lifted my hand from his chest only to lay it against his face. His skin was cool from the rain, but beneath it burned a warmth I would never forget. „I could go with you,“ I said, „and perhaps it would be a life full of wonders. But it would also be one that stole from me land and sky. I do not know if I am strong enough to love only water.“

His lips twitched faintly, as though to speak, but he restrained himself. Instead he placed his hand over mine, holding it to his cheek. „And if I stay, Heroine, the sea will take me – perhaps not today, perhaps not tomorrow, but someday. And then you would still be alone.“

„Then,“ I whispered, „we must let go now.“

The words tasted of iron and salt, heavy on my tongue yet clear. I felt them fall between us, not like a door slamming shut, but like an anchor sinking deep into the water and remaining there.

The storm-light broke open at that moment, brighter, more intense, as though it meant to enclose the decision in its glow. We stood within it like in a silent flame that did not burn, and for a breath I believed we were held by the light, not by the tower.

Lucien stepped closer still, so that our foreheads touched. „Thank you,“ he said, and in his voice there was no fracture, only certainty. „For every word, every glance, every laugh in the rain. You have shown me what it is to not only belong, but to be.“

A gust tore around us, but it felt suddenly different – less an enemy, more a companion showing the way. I closed my eyes and let the image form within me: Lucien walking, not dragged, not thrown, but with his head high, down into the sea as into a home.

When I opened my eyes again, his gaze had not changed. „Are you ready?“ he asked.

I drew a deep breath. „Yes.“

He smiled, and it was not the smile of a man who loses, but of one fulfilling a promise. „Then we take the last step together – to the edge.“

We turned toward the railing, and the storm-light flooded our path, as though it had always known where we were going.

The metal ring beneath our feet trembled faintly in the wind, as if the tower itself could sense that we stood at its outermost edge. Below us the sea struck against the rocks, rhythmic, tireless, and between the waves shimmered veins of light that ran like living arteries through the water. The storm-light above us and the glow beneath us – it was as if the world had reversed its poles for this moment alone.

Lucien laid a hand on the railing, his fingers splaying as

though to feel every drop running down it. I stood close beside him, and the air around us was so charged that each breath tasted as if it had weight.

„You don't have to jump,“ I said, and my voice did not break, though I knew my heart did. „You could wait, one more day, one more night...”

He shook his head. „If I wait, the land will seduce me. And if I stay, the sea will take me anyway – but not in freedom.”

I swallowed. „And if I call you?”

He turned his head, and his gaze struck me like a calm, deep current. „Then I will come. Whole. For a day, an hour, a breath – but I will come.”

We held each other's hands, and it was no grip that bound, but one that carried. Rain whipped against our faces, the wind curved around our bodies, and the light of the storm wrapped us until I no longer knew if the world beyond could even see us.

„I love you,“ I said, and this time I left all restraint behind.

„I love you,“ he answered, and it was as though he said farewell and welcome at once.

He leaned forward, our lips met – salty, cool, and yet with a fire no water could quench. For this kiss there was no measure, no duration; it did not belong to time.

When we parted, he placed my hand upon his chest. „Remember this beat. If you one day feel it again, you will know I am there.”

I nodded, unable to speak.

He set one foot on the narrow strip of masonry outside the railing. The light seemed to thicken, as if to shield

him. The wind sang now, no longer howling, but like a melody heard only once in a lifetime.

I did not hold him back. I could not – and I knew that exactly in this lay my love.

Lucien looked at me one last time. „Stay,“ he said. It was no command, no plea. Only a word, so simple it carried everything.

Then he turned toward the sea, and in one single, flowing motion he leapt.

He did not fall. He glided. The light closed around him, guiding him, and when he touched the water there was no impact – it was as if a door had opened to let him through. For the space of a heartbeat I saw him beneath the surface, surrounded by strands of light that closed around him like arms. Then he was gone, not swallowed in wrath, but taken in a silent, deep acceptance.

I stood there, my hands on the railing, looking out. The sea did not smooth itself, but it seemed... calmer. As though it had been given something it had long desired. The storm-light began to fade, and with it the strange heaviness in the air.

Above me the sky broke open, the first clear blue in days appeared. The sun edged cautiously through the clouds, as if unsure whether it was welcome.

I breathed deeply. The wind smelled different now – lighter, almost sweet.

„Farewell, Lucien,“ I whispered, and the wind took the words, not away, but outward, over the water.

I knew he would hear me someday.

Turning to the ladder, I stepped back into the lantern room. The tower had fallen quiet, almost reverent, and inside me lay a peace that was both empty and full.

Outside, the storm was finally yielding. The sea no longer roared like a beast fighting its cage, but like one that was free.

I knew: when the storm falls silent, the next chapter begins.

As I descended the tower, the light of morning slid through the cracks in the old walls. The air tasted of farewell and beginning all at once, and under the clear sky the land waited – changed, as I was changed. Yet I sensed that not every love would remain on shore.



Chapter 20

When the Storm Falls Silent



Morning arrived like a hand long expected, now hesitantly placed upon my shoulder. I stepped out from the shadow of the tower, and the wind, which in the night still had teeth, was nothing more than breath. Over the bay stretched a sky so freshly washed it seemed almost transparent at the edges. Where the clouds broke open, the blue lay like a bowl cradling something precious. The sea beneath it rested as still as glass, as if in its sleep it had forgotten how to tremble. Nothing broke within it, nothing surged; only long, slow breaths, as though it had to relearn the art of being without wrath.

I descended the cliff path barefoot, my skirts clinging damply to my calves, already beginning to dry in the salt

air. Beneath my soles I felt the warm, rough cobblestones, the tiny splinters of shells the night had carried ashore, and sand soft as though it had been borrowed from some gentler coast. From the village gardens rose the scent of coffee and wet wood. In the yards a rooster crowed too late; the gulls, who had been silent for days, circled once more, but more softly, as if their voices too had to relearn how not to wound.

At the foot of the stairs I halted. The old granite wall guarding the shore was adorned with dark ribbons of seaweed, glistening now in the first light like silk. The tide reached no higher today; it had withdrawn, leaving behind only a trembling shimmer on its surface, a movement I felt in my chest before I saw it. I stepped closer, the air smelling of iron, milk, and fresh bread—someone had just stoked the baker's oven, and the fragrance drifted across the very wall where, as a child, I had sat with swinging legs, gazing at the shimmering, unreadable book of waves. Back then I had often believed the sea whispered my name. Today it did not. Today I heard it only in my own mouth.

„Heroine,“ I said softly, to test if my voice still obeyed me after the vows I had spoken in the night. It did.

I followed the shoreline, to where the strand narrowed into rock. Between two arches hollowed out by tide lay a smooth, secret cove where the sea was always gentler than beyond—a listening ear, carrying only a softened echo of the greater roar. It was there I had first met him, unmasked, not as rumor but as man. It was there I wished to stand again today, not to summon the moment back—for I had learned in the night that to call the past is to lose oneself—but to see what remained when the storm falls silent.

The cove was empty. No fisherman, no child, no dog. Only the shadow of cliffs across a narrow strip of sand,

patterned by the night into fine ridges as though someone had traced stories with a needle's tip. I knelt and ran my fingertips over them; the sand was cool, yet my skin carried warmth as though it had brushed a coal.

„I know you hear me,“ I said into the air, which offered no reply, not even echo. „Even if you do not speak.“

I thought of Lucien, how he had touched the water not as a stranger but as one opening a door into a chamber that had always waited for him. I thought of his leap, which was no fall at all; of the light that held him like hands; of the sound that was none, when he pierced the surface and it remained unbroken. I thought of his last word—Stay—which was neither prohibition nor command, but grace. And I thought of how easy and how heavy it is to obey when obedience serves no one but one's own heart.

Rising, I brushed sand from my knees, and the sun broke through in full. A warm beam fell upon my brow, where in the night I had touched the tower's lens. For an instant I felt as if that lens now hung invisibly above me, as though the tower had laid its speech into my skin. I closed my eyes, listening. The silence was no emptiness. It was dense, as though it cradled something that would soon appear.

When I opened them again, the sea was as before: smooth, moved only by an invisible breath. A gull glided low, its shadow skimming across the surface without rift. I raised my hand, not to wave, but to see if it trembled. It did. Not from cold. Not because I wished to call him. Because I felt him, though I did not know where.

„I am here,“ I said, and knew that today it had to be enough. Not „come,“ not „go,“ not „why.“ Only: I am.

I stepped into the water. It rose above my ankles, cool, with that soft hardness only the sea possesses: it

embraces yet never yields; it holds and releases both. Salt crept into the tiny fissures at my heels, stinging briefly, then healing. The hem of my dress spread like a flower around my legs. Farther out I saw a lighter band of blue cutting the darker depths—the place where the seabed fell away, the place my dreams would always know.

I stood gazing at that line where color sank. I said no more. One does not always need to speak to be heard.

For a time nothing shifted but the climbing light, the warming air. Then, as the sun gilded the cliff edges, another glow appeared in the cove—not the greenish one of night, but a pale, milky shimmer, as though in the depths a thread unspooled, fine as a spider's strand at dawn. It moved, not toward me, not away, but sketching the hem of a form larger than my imagining.

I lifted my hand again, hovering just above the surface. There was no wind. The water lay still enough to mirror my frown back at me. I spread my fingers as if to turn an unseen page. And then, for a heartbeat, beneath my hand lay another shadow—too near not to be seen.

„Lucien,“ I whispered, and I did not know if I called or welcomed him.

The sea made no answer. Yet something within me did, and it was enough.

I let my hand fall, stepped back onto the sand. Behind me, up on the cliff path, I thought I heard footsteps, but when I turned, no one was there. Only the grass, standing calm in the newfound stillness, as if it had forgotten the night.

I knew the day would call me back to the village—to bread scents, to voices and questions, to the plain light of work. But not yet. Not now. The silence held me, and I held it. Between us lay something unbroken, unending.

I sat at the edge of the cove, drew my knees close, and as the sun climbed higher I laid my brow upon them and breathed, as though breathing were an art one must relearn when the storm is gone.

The hours of morning unfolded like silk, slow and weightless, each fold brighter than the last. The gulls wheeled higher now, no longer seeking scraps among the shattered tidepools but soaring as if to relearn the breadth of their own wings. Along the horizon the sun unfurled itself with quiet patience, no longer hidden behind shreds of storm but present, whole, like a face at last unmasked. Its light spread across the water in trembling bands of gold, each one reaching toward the land as if it, too, wished to touch what it had nearly lost.

I walked farther down the beach. The sand beneath my feet was strewn with fragments—shells broken in the storm, bits of driftwood stripped of bark, glass made smooth by a hundred tides. Each piece bore its history, yet here it was, laid anew at my steps. I gathered one shard of glass, green as a bottle's memory, and held it up to the light. Through it the sun bent into a pale emerald flame.

„Is this you?“ I whispered, smiling despite the ache in my chest. „A sign? Or only the world, reminding me that nothing is ever entirely lost?“

The glass grew warm in my palm. I closed my hand around it, then tucked it into my dress, where it rested against my heart.

The sea before me seemed endless. Yet I could not help but think of it not as a void, but as a dwelling—walls of water, roofs of light, corridors of silence in which Lucien now walked. Or swam. Or simply was. I wondered if he remembered me as I remembered him: in fragments, like shells too delicate to bear the weight of a storm, yet too

beautiful to cast aside.

„You told me to stay,“ I said to the horizon. „And I will. But know that staying does not mean forgetting.“

The tide had begun its slow return. Foam curled like lace at the water's edge, and each time it drew back, it left a darker imprint in the sand, like breath fading from glass. I walked into it, letting the sea lap at my calves, and closed my eyes. For a moment, the sound of the retreating waves was so rhythmic it seemed a heartbeat—too slow for mine, too vast for one man's. But still, I knew it.

I opened my eyes, and there he was. Not flesh, not shadow. A vision spun of water and light, standing at the line where the sea deepened. His form wavered, silver-green, his hair a darker thread against the glow, his eyes bright as mirrors of dawn.

„Lucien,“ I breathed.

He did not speak with lips, but the silence itself seemed to shape his words. I am here.

My hand lifted of its own accord. He raised his. Between us lay a stretch of water as still as glass. No ripple bridged it, yet I felt the warmth of his palm as if it pressed against mine.

Tears blurred my sight, though I did not sob. The air itself seemed too sacred to fracture. „I thought it was farewell,“ I whispered, „but perhaps it is not. Perhaps it is... another way.“

The vision inclined his head, and I saw that same smile I had seen in the storm, the smile of a man not losing but fulfilling. Light wrapped him, brighter now, until he was no longer separate from the sea but part of its glow. And still the presence lingered, as though the ocean itself had taken his shape to reassure me: he was not gone.

Then, with a slow grace, the form dissolved into the waves. Only the shimmer remained, threads of dawn weaving themselves back into the fabric of the water.

I pressed my hand to my heart, feeling the shard of green glass beneath the fabric. „I will keep you,“ I vowed. „Not as anchor, not as chain, but as compass.“

The sea made no answer, and yet the silence was enough.

I turned from the water and climbed the narrow path back toward the cliffs. The air grew warmer as I rose, the scent of rosemary from a garden drifting toward me, mingled with smoke from chimneys newly lit. A woman's voice called out to a child; a dog barked, sharp and alive. Life was returning to Marenveil, timid yet eager, as if each soul wished to be certain the world had not ended in the storm.

At the top I stopped and looked back. The sea stretched wide, unbroken, luminous beneath the growing sun. I did not wave. I did not need to. The vision was within me now, and I knew it would rise whenever the silence grew too heavy.

I walked toward the village. Each step seemed both heavier and lighter, as though I carried not grief but a song.

The village of Marenveil seemed almost fragile in the early light, its rooftops damp, its windows catching the sun like shy eyes opening after too long closed. Children's laughter skipped uncertainly along the lanes, chasing the last remnants of night. The cobblestones, still slick from rain, shone as though they had been polished for a feast. Yet the true feast was silence—gentle, unmarred, the kind one wanted to drink slowly, sip by sip.

I walked through the streets as one who returns not from a journey but from a dream. Faces turned toward me,

some smiling, some cautious, all bearing the traces of a storm survived. A neighbor raised her hand in greeting; I answered with a nod, though my thoughts were elsewhere, where the tide had pulled itself flat as a sheet of glass.

At my father's house the door stood open. The scent of bread and coffee drifted out, mixed with the sharper tang of salt that never left our walls. My father sat at the table, shoulders bowed, yet his eyes lifted when I entered. In them I saw not questions, but relief, as though the storm had taken much but had left me, and that alone was enough.

I kissed his brow, light as a promise, then stepped into the small chamber where I kept my books and scraps of letters. The window faced the sea. I pushed it open, and sunlight poured in.

On the sill lay a feather, long and white, left by a gull. I lifted it and held it against the sky. For an instant, it gleamed as though dipped in silver. I set it between the pages of my journal, where it would rest beside words I had yet to write.

„Lucien,“ I whispered, not in sorrow, but in recognition.

The silence that followed was not empty. It pressed close, tender, a silence that contained listening.

I sat at the desk, took up my pen. The first word I wrote was his name. The second was mine. Together they formed no sentence, only a beginning. Perhaps that was enough.

Outside, the gulls wheeled higher, their cries no longer raw but ringing with clarity. The sea spread itself open, calm as a mirror, yet I knew beneath its glass lay currents swift and secret, and in those currents a presence that was no longer absence.

I leaned out the window. For the briefest breath, I thought I saw him again—Lucien—standing at the horizon where sea and sky entwined, his hand raised not in farewell but in greeting. His outline shimmered, then dissolved into the light.

Tears pricked my eyes, yet I smiled. „I will remember,“ I said aloud. „And I will live.“

The air carried my words outward, over rooftops, over cliffs, until they reached the still water, where they belonged.

And there, in the silence after the storm, I felt it: not the ache of loss, but the pulse of love unending, stretching beyond land, beyond sea, beyond time.

*The storm had fallen silent.
But within me, and far beyond me, the vow endured.*

Afterword



Sometimes a story begins very quietly – with the murmur of the sea, the scent of salt in the air, or a dream that never let go of us. *In Love with the Storm* was a journey not only across the pages of this book, but also within our own hearts.

We wanted to write a story about love – not the simple, easy kind, but the kind of love that transforms everything. A love larger than time and land, one that forces us to learn how to say farewell and yet to keep hope alive. A love that does not vanish, but changes its shape – just as the sea never stands still and yet is always the same.

Perhaps you smiled while reading, perhaps you cried. Perhaps you found yourself reflected in Heroine, or in the glow of Lucien's eyes. Perhaps you felt that some stories do not end when the last page is turned, but live on within us – like ebb and flow, which never cease to touch the shore.

For us, this book was more than words. It was a sharing of longing, a piece of heart we placed upon the page. And now, as you have read this far, we carry the hope that this story has touched you, even just a little – the way the sea touches every strand it reaches.

Some chapters in life are written by the sea, others by the heart – and sometimes both weave together into a tale that changes us. For us, this book was exactly that: a reminder that life is always greater when we dare to feel.

If, after reading, you step outside and hear the whisper of the wind, the shimmer of the water, or simply see the gaze of a loved one with new eyes, then this story has fulfilled its purpose.

Thank you for taking this journey with us. Thank you for walking beside Heroine, for meeting Lucien, and for feeling your own heart between storm and stillness.

May your own storm one day show you the truth. And may the silence that follows be filled with love.

Marilia & Agnes

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