

Isla and the Lighthouse Light









Every morning, before the porridge is even warm, Isla pulls on her yellow raincoat and heads for the spiral stairs. The old white lighthouse with its red band rises above the keeper's cottage like a tall friend, and Isla knows every step by heart, all forty-two of them.

She and Grandpa Finn climb together, their footsteps echoing up the stone walls, arriving at the lamp room just as dawn spreads pale and pink across the sea. The great lamp slows its turning and dims as daylight takes over, and Isla watches it the way you watch a candle being blown out.

Below, the harbor is already busy. Grandpa Finn leans on the railing and names each boat bobbing at its mooring: the Kittiwake, the Blue Petal, the Mara Rose. Isla counts their flags, a red stripe, a yellow anchor, a green fish leaping, learning each one until she can name them without looking.





At breakfast, Grandpa Finn sets down his mug and tells Isla something that makes her sit up straight. Tonight, he says, is the night the whole fleet comes home together after a full week at sea. Every boat, every crew, all at once.

Isla presses her nose to the lighthouse window and studies the lamp's round glass light-heart. It looks pale and flat, like a puddle on a cloudy day, not bright and clear the way it should be before a night sailing. She has never seen it look like that before.

A knot forms in her stomach, the kind that will not go away on its own. "The lamp won't light tonight," Grandpa Finn says quietly, shaking his head. The boats are coming home, and the lighthouse will be dark. That is the problem, plain and simple, and Isla feels the weight of it settle over the whole morning.





Grandpa Finn does not waste time worrying. He goes straight to the shelf and pulls down the keeper's log, a thick book with a salt-stained cover, and flips to a page near the back. His finger traces the faded words as he reads aloud.

The old remedy is this: the lamp must drink three brightnesses gathered in a single day. Warm gold from the cliff meadow poppies at noon. A glowing echo from the singing sea cave at low tide. The moon's first silver scooped from the open water at dusk. Grandpa Finn reads each line slowly, as though the words themselves need to be treated with care.

Before either of them can say another word, a round head pops up from the harbor waves below, a silver-grey seal pup, watching them with dark, steady eyes. It barks once, short and clear, and then waits. Grandpa Finn looks at Isla. Isla looks at the seal. "I think we have a guide," she says.





They pack quickly. Grandpa Finn wraps a glass jar in a cloth and tucks a wooden ladle beside it in a canvas bag. Isla slides the keeper's log under her arm, holding it snug against her yellow raincoat, because the instructions must come with them.

The seal pup is already moving, swimming along the base of the cliffs in the direction of the meadow path, pausing every few strokes to glance back. It has the businesslike air of someone who knows exactly where to go.

The cliff path is steep in places, with rocks that shift underfoot. Grandpa Finn picks his way carefully, and on the steepest stretch Isla reaches up and takes his hand. He holds on, and they steady each other, which is how it has always worked between them.





The sun is nearly overhead when they reach the cliff meadow, and the poppies are blazing, orange and red, nodding in the sea breeze like they are agreeing with something. The air smells of salt and warm grass.

Isla crouches among the flowers and goes still. Up close, she can see how the sunlight gathers inside each silky petal, pooling there the way water pools in a cupped hand. It is not a trick of the eye. The light truly sits inside the blooms, gold and dense.

She holds the open jar near a cluster of poppies and breathes slowly, the way Grandpa Finn breathes when he is listening to the weather. She waits. And then, gradually, warmth drifts down from the petals and settles into the glass, and the jar takes on a faint amber color, like the last hour before sunset.





Grandpa Finn watches without saying a word, but his smile says enough. He has the look he gets when something goes exactly right.

Nearby, the seal pup has found a patch of clover and is rolling in it, flippers up, wriggling with what can only be described as satisfaction. Isla laughs at the sight, and the knot in her stomach loosens a little. The jar glows amber in her hands.

Grandpa Finn takes the log from under her arm and uncaps his pen. On the page beside the first task he draws a small golden star. One brightness gathered. Two more to go before dark.





The star is barely dry when Grandpa Finn looks up at the sky, then down at the shore, and his expression sharpens. The tide is dropping fast, he says. They need to reach the singing sea cave before the echo fades, and there is not much time.

They leave the meadow and scramble down a path of sea-smoothed steps cut into the cliff face. Below, the seal pup is already on the rocks, barking encouragement in short, sharp bursts, like a friend calling from the bottom of a hill.

Halfway down, Isla's boot skids on a wet stone. Her stomach lurches. But her hands find the cliff wall, she steadies herself, takes one breath, and keeps moving. Her yellow raincoat is a bright patch against the grey rock, and she does not look down again.





They step into the sea cave just as the last thin sheet of water drains away with a soft hiss, leaving the walls smooth and dark and humming. The sound is low, almost like a voice, rising and falling with the memory of the waves.

Grandpa Finn whispers that the cave only sings for a few minutes at low tide. Isla holds her breath and listens. The hum fills her chest like a note held at the end of a song.

Then the color comes. A ring of pale blue-green light pulses along the walls, keeping time with the hum, brightening and softening, brightening and softening. It is the glowing echo the keeper's log described, and it is here, right now, and they have arrived just in time.





Isla uncaps the jar and holds it toward the shimmering walls. She turns in a slow circle, letting the light find the opening, the way you turn a bowl to catch rain.

The humming swells. The glow on the walls strengthens, and for a moment the whole cave blazes with blue-green light from floor to ceiling, every wet surface catching and throwing it back. Isla stands in the middle of it, jar outstretched, turning slowly.

The glow settles into the jar alongside the amber warmth already inside, and the two colors swirl together without mixing, like oil and water, each keeping its own lane. Grandpa Finn exhales, caps the lid firmly, and holds the jar up once to look. Then he tucks it back into the canvas bag with both hands.





Outside the cave, the seal pup is waiting on a flat rock. When it sees them emerge, it claps its flippers together and dives into the rising tide, spinning in a full circle before surfacing again. Isla claps back.

Grandpa Finn reads the third task from the log, standing there on the rocks with the sea breeze ruffling the pages. The moon's first silver, scooped from the open water at dusk, from a boat. He says the word boat quietly, and they both look toward the harbor.

Isla counts on her fingers. The sun is still above the horizon, but not by much. The fishing fleet will round the point after dark. They have one task left and just enough time to do it, if they move now.





Back at the harbor, Grandpa Finn unties his rowboat, a sturdy vessel about as long as three Islas laid end to end, with two oars and a bench worn smooth from years of use.

Isla coils the mooring rope into a neat loop, a job she has practiced all summer until her coils finally lie flat.

The sky has turned rose and violet by the time they push off from the dock. The seal pup circles the bow in slow, easy loops, its head above water, keeping pace with the oars. The harbor lights are starting to come on behind them.

Grandpa Finn rows with steady, even strokes, and Isla sits at the prow with the canvas bag in her lap, watching the eastern horizon. A thin bright edge is lifting there, the first curve of the moon, pale as a fingernail clipping against the darkening sky.





The moon clears the horizon and lays a long silver road across the water, running straight from the far dark sea all the way to the side of their little boat. Isla has seen moonrise before, but never from out here, with nothing between her and it but open water.

She leans over the side with the wooden ladle and dips it carefully. The moonlight slides into the ladle like cool liquid, and she pours it into the jar without spilling a drop. It takes two scoops, and then the jar is full.

The three brightnesses, gold, blue-green, and silver, swirl inside the glass without blending, each one distinct, and the jar shines with a steady light that is not quite any color she has a name for. Isla holds it against her chest and feels it there, warm and solid.





A horn sounds across the water, low and long, from somewhere beyond the far headland. The fishing fleet. Grandpa Finn ships one oar, cups his hand to his ear, and listens. Then he looks at Isla with an expression that needs no words.

He puts both oars back in and rows hard for shore, his breath coming in long pulls. Isla wraps both arms around the jar and holds it steady against her chest, sheltering its light from the breeze the way you shelter a flame with your hand.

Ahead of them, the seal pup is already racing for the lighthouse rocks, a silver streak cutting through the dark water, as though it knows exactly what comes next and wants to be there for it.





The moment the bow scrapes the dock, Isla is up. She takes the jar from the bag, tucks the keeper's log under her free arm, and runs. The cliff path is dark now, but she knows every turn.

Behind her, Grandpa Finn ties the boat, his hands working the knot by feel. Isla does not wait. She pushes open the lighthouse door and starts up the spiral stairs, counting under her breath the way she always does, one, two, three, all the way to forty-two.

At the top, she stops at the lamp room door, breathing hard, the jar blazing in her hands. Below, through the thick glass, she can see the quay filling with people, faces turned up toward the dark lamp, waiting.





Grandpa Finn's footsteps come up the stairs, slower but steady, and then he is beside her, breathing hard, one hand on the lamp room doorframe. He nods. Together they uncap the jar and hold it over the lamp's glass light-heart.

They pour. The three brightnesses spill in, swirling together at last, and for one long, held breath, nothing happens. The lamp sits dark. Isla keeps her eyes on it and does not look away.

Then the beam blazes out, bold and white, sweeping the full arc of the sea in one great turn. A roar rises from the quay below. And rounding the far point, right on cue, comes the first fishing boat, its crew waving from the deck.





The whole harbor village crowds the quay as the fleet comes in, one boat after another, until all the flags Isla knows by heart are tied up safe at their moorings. The crews call out their thanks toward the lighthouse, and the beam keeps sweeping, steady and sure.

Isla stands on the quay railing with Grandpa Finn's hand at her back. Below them, the silver-grey seal pup rests on the nearest rock, watching the boats with the calm look of someone whose work is done. The empty jar is still in Isla's hands, and it glows faintly, the way a stone holds warmth after the sun goes down.

Grandpa Finn wraps an arm around her, and Isla thinks about the lamp blazing out over the dark water, and the boats finding their way home by it. "Courage is like that," she says, half to herself. "It doesn't stay inside. It has to shine out." Grandpa Finn nods, and the beam sweeps the sea, and the harbor glitters beneath it.



The end



Reading is dreaming with your eyes open



Isla lives with her Grandpa Finn in the keeper's cottage at the foot of the old white lighthouse with the red band. When the great lamp goes dim the very night the fishing fleet sails home, Isla and Grandpa Finn must gather three brightnesses before dark, guided by a silver-grey seal pup along the cliffs and out to sea. Together they pour warm gold, a glowing echo, and the moon's first silver into the lamp just in time to blaze a path for the boats. Isla learns that courage, like lighthouse light, shines outward to bring others safely home.

