

Water surges up the embankment, vicious waves snarling at my feet. They don't make it, spitting as they're forced to slide back into the lake. The waves should really pick another victim, because my toes are already numb from the combination of the cold, damp concrete, the biting spray, and the fierce wind. Yet despite the miserable conditions, a smile pulls at my lips. The lake stretches out before me, and there's a wild taste in the air, an electrifying buzz. My blood pounds. In this moment, it feels like anything is possible.

I step into the lake. Compared to the icy blades of wind, the water is almost warm against my legs. Waves slap against my board, a call to my soul. I can smell the storm, a scent of smoke and darkness curling in the air. It's going to be right above the lake soon. My face is greeted with the patter of the rain, the water falling in billowing sheets. The wind ripples the droplets until the rain is an echo of invisible sails, swelling and deflating. *It's time.*

I clamber up onto the board, rocking with the waves. We float down the shoreline until I heave the sail out of the water, arms straining and knees screaming. The lake water falls away, and my breath catches as I pull the sail up to its full height, rising like a fiend out of the lake. It is a red of warm, wet blood and the glowing embers from a dying fire. I greet it with a smile, then turn to stare down the storm.

Claws of wind catch the sail in a scream of defiance, half tearing it away from me. But I hold on, my arms burning. Beneath my feet, the board is slammed by waves; it turns uselessly with each slap. Fear turns my body numb. If it turns too far, then the sail will crash down on top of me and I'll be devoured by the hungry jaws of the tempest. Desperate, I fight the sail, trying to force it to be steady and still alongside me. It snarls and bucks away, refusing to work with me. A howl of triumph echoes through the air, rain seeping into my wetsuit. *No, dammit!* We've drifted out into the maelstrom, the shore now just a dark mound obscured by fuzzy layers of rain. Water washes over the board against my feet, almost warm compared to the icy air. My wetsuit clings to me, soaked with rain and spray, and my fingers are so, so tired. *Maybe I should just give up.* The grey crown of the sky is a cruel grin above me, it's jagged teeth flashing bone white. A wave of rain splatters against me, kissing my cheeks with a cold whisper. *Give up, give up, give up.* The wind rages anew, pushing and pulling the sail, waves spinning and drowning the board. And I stand, clinging on, in the middle of the raging turmoil.

*No. No, I will not give up.*

Ever so slowly, I relinquish my death grip on the sail, loosening my trembling fingers. The sail pulls away, but steadies. Realisation hits me; I had the sail on too far an angle. Laughter bubbles up in my throat. The board slows its futile spinning, my feet grounding it as I adjust my position to mirror the sail. The wind roars. All I need to do now is pull back on the sail. I grin at the sail. *Stormrider*. A name worthy of a magnificent vessel.

Then I pull back on the sail.

A gale catches, and Stormrider bumps up over a wave, slamming down on the lake. I feel the challenge of it in my bones, and the storm answers with a thunderclap, a ringing boom across the skies. It only makes me smile harder. Ahead, the water ripples and turns dark, phantom hands of wind rushing across its surface towards me. When they're on top of me, snarling and slashing, I lean back and let Stormrider's sail fill. She enters a glide, speeding over the water, a dragon with wings spread. We curve over the lake, wind in my hair and rain on my face, a wild grin ripped free. The storm hisses, but we slice through its rain and ride on its wind, learning its secrets with each roar torn from its mouth.

I taste its fierce, eternal heart with a smile on my face.

And I ride the storm.