

From and For the Coast

Few can survive on the coast. It is a wet warden that draws and pulls on every muscle of your body leaving you cold and discomforted. Stony shorelines adhere to the land like wrought hands; there is no warm clasp of sandy beaches. There is no easy pass, no lasting seasonal sun to cheer weak hearts. Everything on the coast is as it always has been: changing with each booming ocean surge, with each blast of wind.

On this particular coast, tucked into a long-forgotten corner of the world, the pebbled beaches were hemmed in by a chain of mountains that lock in the climate and the inhabitants. Mischievous, ancient spirits ruled the land, right up to the tops of the mountains where the wild took hold again. Those who had come from the sea had only sea as means of an exit, so impassable were the stony crags that hemmed in the thick forest on the shore. Wind was

the crucible that forged survival and rolling erosion here and was the only constant. The tide pulled away at you, bit by bit, until nothing remained but unyielding resilience. Only the strong-willed and those who grasped the mythical could survive in this climate. It was unemotional land; damp and always in a state of unrest.

An unlikely girl had crawled up the slick mud banks many years earlier after a quarrel with her father and the desire for a life of her own. Now the shores to the south of his self-proclaimed kingdom were her home. The land was pockmarked by the malevolent deeds of ancient spirits, who, for so long abandoned by the few that inhabited the coast, had gone rogue. It was in this fog of deceit and insecurity that this young girl carved out her own small place in the world. She was not a traditionally beautiful woman. Her legs were disproportionately short in relation to her torso and she walked with long, confident strides or in hushed tiptoe. Survival was her only companion and this was the way she liked it. Her life was one of solitude and tenacity. She fancied herself a caretaker of this coast, at least the small stretch she could call her own. While others claimed it as property and did little else to give anything back to it, this girl was steadfast in her commitment to it. It was the only home she knew now.

The mischievous coast drew many migrants and Bastion was just like the rest of them. She had tumbled and suckled from a coast, albeit a different one very far away. Now in her late twenties, she harboured no desire to leave. She had carved out a meager existence, free from her father and his selfish plans. Her father took mostly to meddling in the affairs of others who he neither knew nor cared for. Now, as great black boulders were pummeled by morning surf, Bastion picked up a delicate pale blue flower that had blown off the muddy bank and held it a minute. It wasn't an extraordinary

flower but the kind of thing those with keen and wandering eyes notice. Bastion twirled it in her fingers and let it fall to the ground. As she bent down to pick it up again she stretched out her calves and felt her nerves and sinews twinge. She was short and awkwardly shaped but her legs were lean and strong. She cradled the flower in her palm and spoke to it in hushed tones. For no one but her to see, the flower glowed pale green and then blue in her hand. Bastion focused her eyes and squinted at the flower as the its tender pedals seemed to stretch out on command. She had forgotten how she had stumbled upon this ability but she held it very dear to her. Had she anyone to keep such a thing a secret from, she surely would.

She stood for some time with her back to the ocean with her eyes held on the flower. Bastion knew that this was the only home for her, out here in the wilds by herself. It wasn't so much that she was a solitary person; she just couldn't bear the thought having someone else dictating the course of her day. She breathed in every inch of this land and in turn it held her firmly in place. Under crooked limbs of arbutus trees, Bastion and all of the other inhabitants that roamed the shoreline were more or less well looked after so long as they looked after themselves. Bastion would often come down to the shoreline to sit and listen to the rustles and strange noises in the underbrush. All manner of sounds could be heard if one strained their ears enough over the steady, low roar of the ocean surf. Bastion preferred the silence of her thoughts or the nagging presence of the surf, as the days could grow incredibly long without company. The conversations she did have were with the wild—the things that lived out here with her. Those that could make it in this cold and unforgiving place were strong and hardened by many seasons but equally starved of conversation. It was only in the late spring that Bastion ever felt as though any beast could pause long enough to actually enjoy one another. Until then,

she would content herself amongst the trees, foraging and generally keeping a keen eye on all that moved around her. She was wary of others' intentions, for she knew what drove most: the need to survive, at any cost.

Bastion could scarcely recall the shipwreck that brought her and her father here. Her father had long since stolen away to a corner of a peninsula to preside over a land that he claimed as his own, though he was as much a stranger to it as it was to him. For the first few months things had been tenuous between them. Bastion had hopped around their small camp and exclaimed how free she felt, finally rid of the suffocation of their former lives. Her father had scolded her for failing to fully appreciate their plight. Bastion had been tapped to follow in her father's footsteps in a noble landowning family but out here in the great wild nothing, she could spend her days exactly as she pleased. In this new life, Bastion had been hooked by the lack of responsibility to anyone but herself. No lords or ladies or courts or lavish feasts to attend to. No feigning interest in the advances of men who were twice her age with half her wit. Things had not all been to Bastion's liking however.

Bastion's father had acquired a creature, which did nothing but stare at her as soon as they had come across it. The animal had salivated as the ever-precocious girl had slunk around their makeshift camp, trying to help her father. At night, the slimy rasp of the creature, its eyes fixed upon her, would waken her. Bastion had begun to devise her plan to flee as possible. Her father had become so inward looking that he had hardly searched for her at all. It had been his dream to have his child take after him; as a great conjurer of tricks but when Bastion showed little aptitude for magic and insulted him further by running away, he threw himself into his work. This work seemed to consist mostly of stealing away to dusty corners of his

haphazard shack and muttering to himself, usually drunk. On a rare occasion, Bastion might see blue or red sparks flash through cracks in the door but there never seemed to be much to show for these tricks.

As Bastion had grown wary of her father's increasing despondence and the unwanted attention of his lecherous servant, she had readied her own plans to leave. Bastion had made her way deep into the forest, fending for herself as well as she could. She was tenacious but fuller of more bravery than wisdom. She was determined to find her way towards whatever fate awaited her and away from the hooks of what was left of her family and to make some semblance of a life that suited her. Her situation was improved greatly when she discovered that many of the other inhabitants of the coastline were just as keen as her to stay veiled and to live lives in freedom with the solace of being alone. Bastion rarely stayed in one place for long and moved from one hole or cave to another hiding spot. Gradually, she learned to relax, hearing through the chirps and undercover breaths of the forest that her father had taken up residence far away on a high cliff's edge. He threw himself into his conjuring, and would become frenzied from days spent relentlessly shouting at the waves. As the ocean broke against the dark cliffs of the coast, so too did his spirit break. The only specters that ever did appear were not of his making—they skulked down from the tall trees to play and bother unwitting creatures.

Bastion's mother had also been a fortress of a woman: elusive and strong. Her black hair had always been worn up in a bun and she used to hum when she worked in their tiny home. Bastion could remember how she had always smelled so soothing, like pine and wildflowers. Now Bastion wore a small wildflower in her hair as remembrance of those simpler times and her mother's resolute nature. The truth of things however was that Bastion knew she was

different from her mother in just about every regard. She and her mother were opposite poles spinning on a razor thin axis of familial bond. What little she remembered of her mother before arriving on this shore was of constant scolding. Bastion's mother used to chide her for always running around with the boys in the neighborhood of the small town she grew up in.

"Bastion, you silly girl, if all you ever do is chase around boys, getting all muddy, you'll never be a woman anyone will take," her mother had scolded.

"So?" Bastion remembered answering impudently.

"So, later those boys will tire of you and want a wife—they will never marry you while your hair is caked with dirt and you insist on pulling your skirts down everywhere you go."

It had taken Bastion a long time to get used to skirts. Now she wore one she had made herself. It was shorter than she ever would have dared to wear around her mother. Its rough edges held themselves to her thick thighs. The skirt was adorned with bits of whatever Bastion deemed curious and odd. Small shells with holes through the middle were fastened on with lengths of tangled twine that had washed ashore. Strange pieces of salt-warped wood swathed in twine hung like sinister ornaments. Dried moss and wildflowers were tucked into matted fabric. Bastion now loved her skirt, though she had not learned to pull it down any less.

Bastion carried her small body back across the rounded rocks to where the trees slung themselves over the beach. The ancient bent trunks jutted out at odd angles, all of them seemed to lean into the sea air, propping up the sky. Bastion shivered a little as she entered the dense brush of the forest and the air cooled to quiet,

heavy dew. Making her way down a small and well-worn footpath, Bastion hummed a tune without a rhythm or arrangement. She listened keenly but heard little. Slight birds spoke to one another in shrill blasts that seemed to come from nowhere but bounced all around. Things were hard to come by on the lonely coast and one had to take what one could while it was there for the taking. As she took her lonely form back across the rocks and towards her den, four sailors pulled their tattered and salted bodies from the surf.