

## *To Be Wanted*

Esmeralda's boots crunched the firm ground beneath her as she ascended the hill. Shielding her eyes from the midday sun she squinted into the valley below, where the arid terrain transformed into a dense wood.

"Astrid! Come up here!" She turned and called to her partner, who scampered over to join her at the top of the hill.

"What's up?" Astrid caught her breath as she stopped next to Esmeralda, her face shadowed by a gray baseball cap, hair hanging out the back of it in a loose golden ponytail.

Esmeralda pointed to where the forest loomed. "Wanna take a look?"

Astrid smiled. "Yeah! Watch your step getting down here."

The women tread down the hill, tripping over rocks and divots in the hard soil. Grass grew gradually thicker around them until the tall, thick trees of the forest overtook their tiny figures. They waited, and watched, and listened.

Animals skittered on the fringes of their perception. Sunlight burst through the canopy in fits and starts. Damp, lively air filled their nostrils. They heard nothing from the forest itself, even as they reached out inside themselves towards it.

The women stayed close to one another as they explored. Astrid, spry as ever, danced around hazards and clambered over felled trees with casual grace. Esmeralda, quickly feeling her age, hid grunts of effort as she ducked under low-hanging branches and stumbled over pitfalls.

It was cooler here than on the sun-streaked hills and Esmeralda began to feel the chill through her jacket. Sighing, she rested her hand against a tree, letting the natural silence of the forest slowly fill her once more, washing away the turmoil broiling beneath her skin. An image fluttered down upon her mind: herself, at the center of a mass of land; an intangible force, like magnetism, surrounded her; protected her; repelled the dangers that sought her flesh.

From behind she heard the sharp snap of a twig; the firm patter of an animal's paws; and Astrid exclaiming "Oh!"

Esmeralda wheeled around.

"Astrid?"

She scanned the landscape in front of her; she hadn't seen where Astrid had gone. She called for her again as her throat tightened with anxiety. "Songbird?"

For a moment that shambled past there was deafening silence, the forest squashing Esmeralda between its lush green walls. Then Astrid's voice, girlish and out of breath, filled her ears, releasing the vice grip: "Es! I'm over here!"

With some effort Esmeralda found her way across tree trunks and overgrowth to find Astrid nearby, whose freckled olive-brown face was glowing with excitement. She spoke in a deluge.

"Oh, Es! You should've seen it. It looked like a fox, but it was huge and white! I just came upon it all of a sudden, and I was watching it eat; but I must've stepped on something and scared it off. Oh, gosh!"

Esmeralda smiled as the words flooded over her. Astrid was abuzz; she loved animals.

"Gosh, I can't believe it. What was that thing do you think?"

"Hm? What, the fox?"

"Mm, but it was white! There's no white foxes."

"What? Yes there are. I've seen them."

"Wait, really?"

Esmeralda nodded, and slowly she realized that she had only ever seen one white fox; and with sinking spirit she realized what white fox she had seen, and where, and when; and she hoped deep within her heart that this was not the same fox, and wished greatly to take back what she had said, feeling as though she had spoken her anxiety into existence.

Eager to change the subject and now also to leave the forest, Esmeralda suggested they head home while it was still light. Astrid's glowing smile seemed to dull a bit, but with a stretch and a yawn she agreed; and so they started back towards the northern hills, hand in hand, helping one another traverse the rough terrain.

The damp air of the woods had soaked into Esmeralda a bit, and she huddled up next to Astrid, whose warmth comforted her. The younger woman clutched her close as they navigated the forest.

Something moved and Esmeralda stopped, her eyes darting to the right. She had seen something - had she?

“Es, love, what’s up?”

Esmeralda let go of Astrid’s arm and walked forward.

“I saw something.” The words came out before she could consider them, but she was already bending over and picking it up by the time she could’ve said anything else.

“It” was an uncanny thing; polygonal, worn-looking, textured as though made of sandstone. Markings Esmeralda didn’t recognize were etched into it on all sides, forming mesmeric patterns. A faint, pulsing light the colour of the spring sky emanated from them, a soft blue glow.

Esmeralda turned it over for a long moment in her hands, studying it closely, fingers awash in the pallid light. She handed it to Astrid, who had joined her; she was also fascinated by it.

“It’s *warm*,” she said, a puzzled expression on her face. Esmeralda nodded. They stood there in silence, examining the object together.

“Do you think it’s from before the collapse?”

Esmeralda shrugged. “Do you? You’re the academic.”

Astrid laughed. “Es, you’re literally a *teacher*.” She handed the object back to Esmeralda. “Anyway, I have no idea when or where this thing is from. I don’t recognize any of these markings at all.”

Esmeralda shook her head. “Me either, but I don’t feel anything nasty from it. Let’s bring it with us and see if we can figure out what it is.” She shoved it into her bag and they continued on.

Deep in thought, Esmeralda spoke little as she and Astrid found their way back to the hills. She felt the silence of the forest filling her once more, smothering her racing thoughts. It reminded her of something Astrid had said soon after they’d first met, when with a sly smile she’d barbed Esmeralda about being the “strong, silent type”.

Esmeralda stifled a giggle.

The sun sank as they trekked back to their motorbike, a beaten-up old thing Esmeralda had driven for years, its body a sickly gray covered in stains. After rising early and hiking all day, Esmeralda was grateful even for the motorcycle’s thin, hard seat; and with Astrid’s arms around her she started the engine.

To their left, far below the derelict cliffside road, the Al-Rahba twinkled in the late afternoon sunlight. Esmeralda cherished living near the water, its cool

breeze a constant companion to her busy mind. The Al-Rahba's cerulean waves were the first thing she'd noticed about living in Rask, at the time by herself in a crumbling little hut. Every morning, stepping outside, the Al-Rahba was what greeted her, a cavernous expanse that met the sky and continued forever, as though a painter had splashed azure across the infinite stretches of reality.

"It's mysterious and stormy, just like you," Astrid had quipped one night, grinning and blushing as they'd held hands by the water. It was what Esmeralda thought of whenever she saw the sea, whenever she felt its wind. She smiled now as she rode, Astrid's arms tight around her waist, the wind whipping twilight's chill into her face as she maneuvered the familiar hazards of the dilapidated highway.

A half-hour's ride from their excursion site that day was Rask, a town of fractured cobblestone streets perched precariously amongst the hills. Its buildings were uncanny mish-mashes of materials, houses being built, re-built, and patched up with whatever was available over the years. Low-roofed, crooked shacks made up Rask's neighborhoods, worn roads winding through the helter-skelter layout of its disparate, many-coloured buildings. From far away, Esmeralda always thought the town looked like a diorama made of trash.

She drove straight through the town, only coming to a stop before the weather-beaten lighthouse lying comfortably alone on the village's outskirts.

They were home.

Esmeralda had fixed it up herself and her amateurish, survivalist construction was plain to see from the outside, its original storm-grey exterior patched with a variety of mismatched materials and means, resembling a hastily constructed model.

"Haphazard and messy, but it gets the job done - just like you," Astrid had joked once, while helping her do repairs. Esmeralda smiled as she unlocked the door.

The bottom floor opened into a modest kitchen, a small open area where they kept a small amount of foodstuffs, a woodstove, a table and two chairs. On the back wall was perched a small window, where the light peered through in the afternoon, when the sun was falling in the sky. Astrid stayed here to make tea while Esmeralda climbed the short staircase that wound to the top floor, the place they did most of their living.

The room here wasn't large, but its high ceiling lent it a cavernous feel. Against one wall sat a bookcase, built by Esmeralda herself, its dark wood crooked and creaking under Astrid's modest collection of texts; across from this was a large bay window that opened up out onto a crumbling balcony, where in the evening the setting sun poured through its glass panes, filling the room with

luminous orange light as though the world were on fire; and on clear nights Esmeralda and Astrid would sit outside, and Astrid would pluck away on that strange little instrument of hers, Esmeralda listening dutifully by her side, until the night sky turned the same violet black as the Al-Rahba did on moonless nights and she would gaze out into it, that great endless smear of darkness smudged across her field of vision.

Below the window lay a small cot wrapped in thick blankets, where they slept, close to the fireplace; and in the corner sat a small, worn desk the women both shared, Esmeralda's painting materials stuffed into its drawers, various trinkets of Astrid's scattered across its top.

Esmeralda dropped her bag and sat down on the cot with an exhausted grunt. She felt her mind wander to the strange artifact they'd found, but she was exhausted, and she wrenched her brain back to her, like a disobedient pet. Now she thought of what Astrid had seen, and Silvia-

"Black tea, for the professor." Astrid's voice startled Esmeralda out of her head. The younger woman marched up the stairs and sat down next to Esmeralda, setting two cups of tea carefully on the floor before them. At the use of this academic title Esmeralda glared at Astrid, who simply smiled.

They were silent a bit, and Esmeralda lost herself looking at the Al-Rahba out the window, a faint chill drifting in through the glass, until Astrid asked what she was thinking about.

"Just what we found." Esmeralda sipped her mostly untouched tea, now growing lukewarm.

"You're not worried it's dangerous, are you?"

Esmeralda shook her head. "Like I said, I didn't sense anything overwhelming from it. Whatever it does probably isn't foul, or even that strong. I'll do a cleansing spell on it to make sure, though."

Astrid nodded. "Alright. That's your lane. I'll stick to the books."

Esmeralda frowned, but said nothing.

They finished their tea mostly in silence, and Astrid went downstairs to wash herself in the basin. With faint reluctance pulling at her heart Esmeralda opened her bag and retrieved the artifact.

It felt, looked, and behaved the same as earlier. As night cloaked the room in darkness Esmeralda lit one of the candles on the desk and sat, the hard wooden chair creaking under her. In the flickering light she studied the object, tracing

its patterns with her eyes. After some time she pursed her lips, retrieved brush and ink and parchment from the desk drawers, and began constructing a spell.

Esmeralda's limbs ached but with some consternation she drew out a series of dramatic characters on her scroll, imbuing in each stroke something of her magic. Tuning out everything but her own little world, she looked deep within herself, and as she painted she called upon certain elements, energies, and ideas, pulling them up out of her soul, like reaching into a black pit and grabbing prey and yanking it out; what she called upon was anything she felt would help cleanse the artifact of any traps or curses embedded within it. When she'd finished writing she tore off the length of parchment, set it down in the middle of the room, and placed the object on top of what she'd written, a hypnotizing design of dramatic brushstrokes.

In silence Esmeralda began to move methodically around the room, a bizarre dance to no music or discernible rhythm. Esmeralda was tall, and she'd never carried her frame with much care, but she was an experienced witch and her movements now were graceful and fluid, reflecting her skill. Her eyes were shut tight as she danced and worked to focus on her spell.

As she twirled and leapt wind began to swirl around her, unnatural in origin, not cool or warm but simply present, its energies sending Esmeralda's dark curls gently swaying across her face as she moved and various loose items around the room - papers, fabric, open books - fluttering. It filled her body, too, and she felt its touch, fleeting but infinite in its depth, and she felt it coil around both her and this strange object she'd found. Her mind was empty, her thoughts blown away in the breeze. The wind followed her as she danced.

Her magic yielded no response and after a while Esmeralda gently laid it all to rest, sighing with exhaustion as her arms dropped at her sides. Outside the moon and stars had risen, and the mild daytime had given way to a chilly night, and the room had grown cold; shivering, Esmeralda sat gingerly by the fireplace, tending logs and kindling with practiced skill. Eventually Astrid sat beside her, having crept up the stairs mouse-quiet.

Her face glowed a warm honey-brown in the firelight. She smiled at Esmeralda when she sat down, but when she spoke her expression was one of concern. "I wanted to wait for you to finish before I came in. Is - is it ok?" Her eyes darted to the thing on Esmeralda's desk. The older woman yawned and explained what she'd done.

Astrid grinned. "Well, the wind loves its loyal retainer."

Esmeralda reached out and ruffled Astrid's hair, yielding playful grumbling from the young woman. Esmeralda smiled. "The wind is always there for me." She paused. "Like you are."

At this Astrid blushed and smiled. “Es...Well, I’m glad I can be. And I’m glad you’re here for me, too.”

Together the women quietly passed the night, their thoughts and conversation wandering as it always did. In the warm glow of the fire’s embers and each other’s embrace they fell asleep, as the strange stone they’d found sat on Esmeralda’s desk, runes pulsing faintly and steadily through the night.

---

“Shut the door behind you, Miss Vicario.”

The woman spoke sternly, with an air of authority befitting the medals pinned to her black vest, and the golden stag crest sewn into the black peaked cap she kept perched atop her head. It was authority so thick you could taste it, Esmeralda had thought to herself once; the way it smothered you never went away.

“Yes, Madame Giroud.”

The young woman stopped and closed the door to Silvia’s office, shutting it off from the academy’s halls. As she did so Silvia stood and cupped a firm hand around her face, pinning the young woman against the ornate mahogany wall behind her. Her heart leaped into her throat as the soft fabric of Silvia’s shirt, buttoned tight at the wrists, tickled her cheeks, and as its aroma filled her nostrils. Silvia’s eyes, the same colour as the stag on her cap, glittered hungrily, and her dark hair, flecked with gray, tumbled over the girl in curtains like the night sky.

Esmeralda averted her gaze. “V-Vi, we shouldn’t anymore. Not here.”

Silvia let out a low, bemused laugh. “I’m sorry, pet. It’s a special day. I couldn’t help myself.” As she pulled away from the wall Esmeralda locked eyes with her again, inquisitive.

“Special? Um - What d’you mean?”

Silvia took Esmeralda’s hand tenderly in her own and kissed it. The young woman blushed.

“I’m ready to formally make you my apprentice, Esmeralda. I’m ready to show you what I’ve *really* been working on.”

Esmeralda’s spirit soared; she nearly leaped from the wall in excitement. “I’m ready, Vi. You can show me.”

Silvia grinned, her eyes narrowing. “Without further delay.” And in the blink of an eye she had conjured a silver light between her fingers, impossibly bright yet

painless to perceive, like its very colour were an optical illusion. Esmeralda had never seen anything like it.

Silvia chained it between her hands, its unnatural bloom glinting off the medals pinned to her breast. It writhed through the air in jerks as it moved. A wicked smile spread across her face, cast in stark shadow by the scalding light she now played with.

Esmeralda stood transfixed, eyes floating dreamily between the light and her teacher. Her cheeks flushed.

“This is it, pet. I can finally show it to you.”

Esmeralda’s heart thundered. She felt a dark excitement brewing inside of her, the kind she felt whenever Silvia paid her special attention. The muscles in her arms twitched. She swallowed, trying to stifle the fear rising within her.

Silvia’s eyes shined at Esmeralda. “Come closer, pet. I’m going to show you the kind of strength we can wield together - and you’re going to show me much more than that.”

Esmeralda stood perfectly still as Silvia once more took her face by the hand, this time locking her in a slow, sensitive kiss; and then in one savage motion Silvia plunged an arm bathed in dazzling white light straight into Esmeralda’s chest, swallowing her whole.

It was profound; a hand thrusting inside of her, deeper and deeper, terrifying in its unceasing, unstoppable advance. It reached up inside of her and filled her body with icy light, blinding each of her senses, consuming her. The hand reached up and wrapped around her soul and took it from her, took *her*, made her its plaything, frozen and powerless to resist the awful chill consuming her. She felt herself writhing, but couldn’t move. She felt herself screaming, but couldn’t make sound. Silvia went further and further, into dark parts of herself she had no idea existed -

Esmeralda awoke in a clammy sweat, breathing hard. Astrid’s arm was draped across her body; slowly, as physical feeling returned, it felt leaden across Esmeralda’s chest. The room was mostly dark, save for a faint white glow. She sat up, slowly, eyes tracing the room and settling on the bay window, where the gentle rays of the moon and stars bathed the room in soft silver light.

Esmeralda rubbed her face. Her breathing calmed; she tried desperately to shove the dream out of her mind as she laid back down, focusing on Astrid’s touch for comfort. For a long time she lay there, enveloped in silence, until the familiar warmth of Astrid’s hand in her own allowed her to fall back asleep; all while grim fear nestled deep within her heart.

---



At breakfast Astrid was eager to start studying the artifact, and Esmeralda was eager to get the day over with. She was needed at the academy in Rask, teaching students how to fight.

Astrid pat her head tenderly before she left. "There, there. It'll be over before you know it. And then you can come back here and listen to me talk all about what I've figured out."

With a smile and a kiss Esmeralda swept out into the chilly autumn air. The sky was uniform gray and she sighed as she kicked her motorcycle into gear, frowning under her scarf. A fall chill had fully gripped the hills that morning; Esmeralda felt constricted by it. As she rode she looked ruefully at the Al-Rahba, its sapphire surface robbed of brilliance by the clouds overhead, its surface roiling with cool anger.

Even among the roughshod buildings of the old port, Rask's academy was especially ugly, and Esmeralda hated spending half her week there. Cut off from the rest of town by walls, its outside was mostly plaster of a stained and sickly eggshell colour, and it had been visibly beaten up in many places. The architecture was jagged and boxy, and a pair of large, crumbling stone stags loomed menacingly on either side of the entrance, faces twisted in vicious anger. Inside the building was mostly a series of empty rooms for practicing combat magic, but on many of its walls hung the black-and-gold flags and decorations that reminded Esmeralda of the capital. She did her best to ignore them.

Esmeralda had no desire to teach anyone how to fight, but this was the only work in a backwater village that suited her. She strode into the building with a scowl, smoothing down her windswept hair and tying it back into a ponytail that hung heavily down her body. She passed by several other teachers on her way to the classroom, greeting no one.

Esmeralda's specialty was magic-in-place, things that took time and focus to channel and use correctly - like the cleansing charm she had used on the artifact - and which she almost never got to show her students. But she could sling spells, too, nasty ones cooked up by mages of the past to hurt, maim, kill, burn, destroy.

Esmeralda abhorred fighting, but she was one of the most capable instructors Rask had, if not its most engaged. She taught older students, teenagers and young adults, many of whom would soon leave Rask to join the military in the capital. Others would stay in town and volunteer for the militia, and an unknown few would follow some yet unseen path - banditry or private employment, usually.

As she looked out amongst them now, Esmeralda hated to think of the lives of violence many of these children were marching into, and it weighed on her anytime she stood within these walls. But the school provided the food she and Astrid ate, and for as much as she hated violence she was good at it; if these students had to learn from someone, there wasn't anyone in Rask who could throw a bigger punch than Esmeralda.

Though she held back when sparring them, occasionally one of her students surprised her, with strength or ingenuity or some other intangible quality that can't be taught but can save one's life in a fight, and Esmeralda would need to reach a little deeper into her bag of tricks and offer them a taste of actual power, the kind built only on ferocity, nothing more, only as controlled as its wielder is skilled, just as frightening to wield as face.

Esmeralda could lose herself easily in a fight, decisions flowing out of her with grace and inspiration, as natural as breathing. It felt good, and she was ashamed and frightened of it. She sought the same fulfillment from her solitary performances in her and Astrid's bedroom, her dances of peace where the lulled around her gently. Here, it lashed out, whipping around her in ferocious surges.

Sluggish from poor sleep and the autumn cold settling in her bones, Esmeralda autopiloted her way through her class, mostly allowing her group of 13 free time to practice amongst themselves; if her students needed help, they could ask for it. Esmeralda stood off to the side, consumed in her thoughts.

Her students rarely needed anything from her once she'd shown them something enough; mostly they worked with lower magic, spells that were impactful and dangerous but not overly technical or demanding. They could learn heavier stuff later, somewhere else; Esmeralda had no desire to reveal the depths of the hideous power magic afforded them access to. She would keep that secret to herself.

By mid-afternoon her time with the students was up and she left the academy much as she entered it, lips curled in a frown, hard scarlet eyes fixed forward.

A chill still bit the air, but the afternoon sun was warm on Esmeralda's face. She swung her leg over her bike and started it, bursting forth from the academy grounds with the wind roaring in her ears. She imagined it cleansing her as she rode away from the crumbling shantytown and toward the lighthouse she knew waited in the distance.

Esmeralda arrived home to Astrid sitting in front of a stack of books. Eager for a break, she helped Esmeralda prepare their supper, which they ate sitting on the balcony outside their bedroom. As they did so Astrid was quick to discuss the artifact.

“I haven’t been able to find a single thing about a device like that, even in the big reference books I have.” Her wavy hair shone gold in the setting sun as she shook her head. “Nothing even close. And we still have no idea what it even does.”

The women sat quietly as the setting sun filled the air around them. Esmeralda’s mind wandered, foggy, until Astrid broke the silence.

“Es, do you want to go for a ride?”

Jolted out of her trance Esmeralda turned to see Astrid smiling mischievously.

“I’m sick of staring at words. It’s not bad out. Let’s go somewhere.”

Esmeralda needed no convincing; the suggestion felt like it lifted a weight off her chest. She smiled. “The Hakala girl’s tired of reading! Hell must’ve gone and frozen over.”

Astrid laughed. “Oh, shush! Go get our coats if we’re riding, it’s chilly.”

The bike jackhammered over the shattered highway as Esmeralda tore south, away from Rask, the twilight sun illuminating the road before them with an angelic glow. Astrid clung to her in a bear hug as she deftly maneuvered around the cliffside.

The women rode until the highway began to trail away from the sea, at which point they pulled over and sat arm-in-arm at the edge of the bluffs, feet sticking out over the waves below. As the cool blue of dusk settled in around them Esmeralda thought of a recent night quite similar to this one, when in front of the Al-Rahba Astrid had nestled up beside her and with glittering eyes whispered sweet things to her.

“You know,” she’d murmured, “I’ve been thinking - Astrid Hakala-Vicario has a nice ring to it.”

And as it had then, it made Esmeralda smile now, and she turned to Astrid and gave her a peck on the cheek.

The women held each other and talked as the cloak of night thickened and the wind’s bite grew savage, pushing them ever closer together. Esmeralda’s eyes wandered over the scene before her, drinking it in greedily; she imagined herself out amongst the waves, gliding along the surface of the water, forging bravely ahead into the mysterious horizon where nothing ever went or came.

“You were so broody before.” Astrid spoke in a sleepy singsong, looking up at Esmeralda. “I was wondering what was wrong.”

“I had the academy today. And I didn’t sleep well last night. It wasn’t fun.”

“I know, I know.” Astrid smiled, a little sadly. “But I worry about you. You always try to do everything on your own.”

“Not this.” With her arms clasped firmly around Astrid, Esmeralda leaned down and kissed her; they lingered together for a long moment. When she pulled away Astrid cupped a hand around her face and their eyes met; Astrid didn’t speak, but Esmeralda felt she understood what she was saying.

When the cold finally chased them back home the half moon’s gentle glow watched over them as they rode. Thanking it as they arrived home, the witches went straight to bed, wrapping themselves tightly in blankets and one another, the lunar glow of the sea splayed out before them.

---

“Hey Pru. C’mere girl.”

The fox’s eyes, onyx pools that seemed to dance in the firelight, focused on Esmeralda. Pru had always unnerved her; something eerie lurked behind those eyes, she thought.

Pru ambled over and sat at Esmeralda’s feet; she reached down and scratched the fox behind the ears. Silvia hummed with pleasure.

“She’s warmed up to you. She’d never listen to anyone else like that, besides me.”

Esmeralda smiled. “I’m glad I meet her standards.”

Silvia extended a hand and ran it through Esmeralda’s hair, brushing her fingers just barely against Esmeralda’s ears; Esmeralda felt electricity bubble within her. She closed her eyes and let Silvia continue.

“Your hair is so beautiful, pet.” Silvia let out a low laugh, half purr, and kissed Esmeralda’s cheek, whispering to her as she did so. “Let’s go downstairs. I have something to show you.”

With another kiss Silvia stood up, moving to unlock the heavy wooden door in the corner of the room. Esmeralda opened her eyes slowly, excitement and terror pouring into her heart. Her hands shook. She stood and followed Silvia into the cellar.

The room they entered was suffocatingly musty. Silvia lit a candle at the bottom of the steps, and though Esmeralda knew what to expect the vile scene still shocked her: a man was blindfolded and bound to a chair in the middle of the room, his face bruised, swelling, and bloody. His clothes were filthy, stained

with sweat and blood and things Esmeralda didn't want to think about. He struggled as flickering light threw her teacher into relief.

Silvia's thick curls framed her callous smile. "Watch closely, pet. It's important you get used to this now." Esmeralda felt Pru sidle up beside her just as Silvia reared back and kicked the man in the stomach, sending him sputtering.

She leaned close to him as he coughed, speaking in a low, hungry whisper. "I don't like to play with my food. Talk, and you'll save yourself a lot of pain."

For some time the scene unfolded as Esmeralda stood stock still, absorbing each moment with agonizing attention. Silvia hurt the man; the man, in agony, refused to talk; Silvia hurt the man again. As time went on her savagery grew, but he continued refusing to answer her questions. Esmeralda grew dizzy as violence slowly overwhelmed each of her senses, the sounds and scents and sights of the cellar slowing turning also into tastes and feelings within her mind. Her legs felt weak.

Rubbing her bloodied knuckles Silvia strolled over to Esmeralda with astonishing nonchalance. She leaned in close. "It's your turn, pet. Just like I taught you."

Once again she kissed Esmeralda on the cheek; Esmeralda nodded grimly and approached the man, light gathering around her fingers.

Silvia's words echoed in her mind: "Like pulling a tooth." She could see them slithering coolly out of the woman's icy smile: "Just reach in and give it a yank."

Esmeralda was close to him now, her arm submerged in blinding light up to the elbow, a terrible and unnerving light. The man thrashed; Esmeralda willed herself not to hear his screams as she reared back and plunged her arm deep into his chest.

Esmeralda's eyes opened with a jolt, her heart pounding earthquakes through her entire body. Everything was still. She saw little in the darkness of night, but knew she was in bed. She felt Astrid next to her, whose warmth was a calming weight against her body.

For a long time, Esmeralda lay there in the darkness, perfectly still and trying not to think, until a fractured sleep seized her, and she dreamt no longer.

---

The next day Esmeralda was entirely free, and after a morning of fruitless painting for her and fruitless research for Astrid they decided over a light meal to return to the forest, artifact in tow, in the hopes of finding some clue to its origin. The pair thus rode back to the hills north of Rask, where the forest they'd visited sat nestled between steep, rocky cliffs.

As they descended once more into the lush valley Esmeralda tried to talk to the forest; it remained silent. Nothing stirred within her. Pursing her lips she began the arduous traversal of the forest's rough grounds, knees aching as she fought to keep up with Astrid's fleet pace.

As they searched Esmeralda realized she could hear whispers on the wind, echoes of the forest's past. They were indecipherable, as though she were hearing them in a dream; these voices and their words both were phantoms, and Esmeralda scowled, feeling strongly her head was busy enough without the extra chatter. She tuned the whispers out and slowly they receded, and the wind blew through only her hair once more.

As time wore on the sun drew low in the sky, reeling light in from the forest like a fishing line, and Astrid and Esmeralda grew increasingly despondent as they failed to find anything. Astrid complained that her feet hurt; Esmeralda had felt unsettled all afternoon, and exhaustion was hammering her.

With weary eyes Astrid pouted in Esmeralda's arms. "Let's go home, Es. There's nothing here."

Esmeralda squeezed her. "Yeah, we won't find anything. We've done enough stomping around. Let's get outta here."

Astrid responded with a smile and they began their trek back, an isolating and unsettling darkness rising up around them, carrying numbing cold in its grasp. On their ride home Astrid buried herself against Esmeralda, who was grateful for her partner's warmth as the frigid wind whipped past her face.

Once they arrived home they warmed up by the fireplace and shared a meal, then sat outside gazing at the sea as it churned under the nighttime sky. Together they sat, for a long time, keeping each other warm.

Esmeralda remained deep in thought, looking out at the wind-licked waves of the Al-Rahba, until an idea struck. She asked Astrid if she'd ever seen a conjuring spell before.

Astrid shook her head. "No, never."

"I'm not surprised. It's complex, and it's normally not worth the risk involved, so nobody ever really learns it. But what it does is, you can basically reach into something's innate history and summon echoes of its past."

Astrid frowned. "Echoes of its past?"

“It can be anything. Like - it can be a memory playing back in your mind, or something you physically see. It’s almost like divination. You have to interpret whatever you get.”

“You know I don’t like you doing dangerous stuff, Es.” Astrid sounded tired; she faced the sea as she spoke. “How do you even know this kind of magic? Where’d you learn it?”

Esmeralda felt rage surge inside her, for just a moment, like an animal lashing out with its tail; it scared her. She was silent for a long time before she decided what to say. “You pick things up, you live as long as I do.”

She smiled and cast a wry glance at Astrid, who continued looking glumly out at the horizon.

Esmeralda ran her fingers through Astrid’s hair, glittering in the moonlight. “I know what I’m doing, songbird. You know I don’t do anything I don’t think I can handle.”

Astrid looked up at Esmeralda now, who saw in her emerald eyes a deep sadness. She spoke in a whisper. “I don’t think you always know what you can handle.”

Esmeralda ran a finger lightly down Astrid’s face. “I can handle this, Astrid. I promise.”

Astrid’s expression didn’t shift, but she placed a hand over Esmeralda’s and squeezed it. “Alright. I’m here to help you, you know.” The pair exchanged a kiss and passed some time in silence before the nighttime cold chased them inside for good, and it came time to perform the spell.

Esmeralda splashed several lengths of parchment with ink, all complex symbols seldom seen in common spells. Laying them in a pattern on the ground in front of their home, Esmeralda placed the artifact on one of the runes while she stood next to another. Astrid watched from the doorway, arms folded.

As the breeze around her calmed for a moment, Esmeralda took a deep breath and began casting her spell.

In the dense nighttime cold she danced around her calligraphy, silently reciting the spell’s incantation and centering within herself what she felt gave her strength: the ocean breeze, Astrid’s gentle support, her own desire for repentance. An ephemeral mist rose around the lighthouse grounds, and the air crackled with something ancient. Gooseflesh ran down her limbs.

Abruptly Esmeralda stopped moving, having returned to her original location, and she began knitting and kneading the air with her fingers, coaxing out of the

object its own intangible history. Images began to form in her mind, and emotions in her heart, and sensations in her body; she felt them coming into focus as her fingers danced through the air.

What she felt most clearly of all, however, delivered a rude shock; within her hands she suddenly felt the numbing, frigid fur of an animal, wondrously soft, like frozen silk. Her fingers were paralyzed as it enveloped her digits, her palm, and began to snake up her wrist-

She stumbled, and as her concentration broke she lost control of the spell. In quick succession there was a piercing bang that echoed along the dark coastline and a psychic explosion that was felt, not seen, its force rippling outward from Esmeralda, who was sent hurtling through the night. She landed in a heap on the ground and Astrid, struggling through the energy that still hung heavy in the air, rushed to her.

“Es! Are you OK?”

Esmeralda heard Astrid running as she took a deep, rattling breath and felt pain radiating through her wrists; she’d broken her fall with her hands. She was on her knees. Astrid’s hand settled upon her back, rubbing gently.

“Es, are you OK, love?” Esmeralda felt grateful for Astrid then, her voice and touch a needed comfort after the shock of botching the spell. She sat up and tried to calm her breathing; her entire body was trembling.

“Just stay here. I’ll get you some water.” Astrid was gone a moment, sprinting back with a canteen and a cloth that she used to wash Esmeralda’s face.

Esmeralda held the drink with weak hands; her palms burned as though frostbitten. Her breath tasted sick. Astrid sat beside her for a long time, holding her as the moon and stars rose high above them. Esmeralda choked back tears, choked down the water, and eventually returned inside with Astrid, who insisted they go straight to bed.

Once they’d huddled close to one another underneath their blankets, Astrid took Esmeralda’s hand and asked if the spell had worked.

“Did you see anything?” Her eyes were wide and curious, like a kitten’s. “What happened?”

“I felt something,” Esmeralda managed.

“What did you feel?”

Esmeralda wouldn’t say, and Astrid, eyes darkening, didn’t ask again.



Deep into the night Esmeralda lay there, quivering and stifling sobs, Astrid's hands as frigid as snow between her fingers.

---

Esmeralda had gone to Silvia's office to discuss that week's assignments, but almost immediately she'd been grabbed and pinned against the wall.

Silvia, the rare person who could match Esmeralda's size, loomed over her; her heart jumped as Silvia's breath tickled her ear.

"Come over tonight, pet," she whispered. "I want you to spend it with me."

Esmeralda felt herself overtaken by a forbidden excitement as she promised to go home with Silvia that day. For the next several hours she went about her business feeling poisonous, like anyone in her vicinity could be tainted by her terrible secret. Her focus wandered in her classes as she sat close to the walls, silent, hyper attuned to the space around her lest anyone get too close.

As the sun began its slow descent behind the city walls and the air grew hazy, Esmeralda made her way back to Silvia's building. Silvia met her outside, and with a lithe hand gently wiped the sweat off her forehead. Esmeraldablushed.

Silvia led her by the hand off the academy campus, striding amongst the low brick buildings of the city center. When they reached her home Silvia unlocked the door and beckoned Esmeralda inside; she followed, her heart fluttering, sweat trickling down her back from the sticky heat of dusk.

As soon as she entered Silvia seized her, having her more fully than she could in her office that morning. Esmeralda, already overheated from the walk over, felt her mind draw blank as Silvia kissed her, like she were asleep.

The older woman whispered in her ears once again. "What would you do for me, pet?"

Esmeralda, trembling, responded in a low hiss. "Anything."

Silvia stroked her face. "I have another one for you tonight." She spoke in sweet purrs that made Esmeralda's knees quake. "I need you to take care of it." She drew back a bit and kissed Esmeralda again, still speaking in a come-hither tone. "It needs your deft touch...You're so much *quieter* than I am." She smiled, and it made Esmeralda shiver.

She looked, dazed, into Silvia's eyes. They reminded her of a predator's fangs, razor sharp and gleaming. "I'll take care of it."

Still smiling Silvia touched her lips with her fingers; as she withdrew them thin, silvery wisps of light swirled around her hand, coiling down towards her wrist.

It always reminded Esmeralda of snakes. The light sparkled, softly illuminating Silvia's fair cream-white skin in the dim room.

With care Silvia pressed her fingers against Esmeralda's lips. The wisps of light slithered into her mouth, and she grimaced as the magic wormed its way through her. Inside herself she felt the dawning of new information, an instantaneous deluge of information, all about the person she was going to kill. Silvia had used her spell to bestow upon Esmeralda, all at once, the knowledge that she possessed about Esmeralda's target that night.

The way Silvia wielded such sensitive magic - the manipulation of the mind, the modification of one's own knowledge and memory - so casually frightened and enthralled Esmeralda; every time she witnessed it she felt terrified and jealous. She felt now that she wanted Silvia's inventiveness, courage, and talent; what she saw as allowing Silvia to cook up such wicked spells and wield them with aplomb.

Whenever Esmeralda's own beliefs wavered, Silvia would remind her that what they did helped keep them safe; and Esmeralda would be overcome with envy for her teacher's self-assuredness, her easy confidence, her belief in herself. Esmeralda wanted that power, too, but she hadn't yet proven herself Silvia's equal; nowhere close. A deep frown stretched across her face.

Silvia wrapped her arms around Esmeralda and she was pulled out of her own thoughts. "Take care of it tonight, pet," she cooed. They kissed again, deep and slow, and Esmeralda savoured the taste of it, her doubts and concerns swiftly wiped away.

Silvia offered another wicked smile. "Stay with me a while first."

By the time Esmeralda was out the door thick clouds had settled in, shrouding the moon and smothering the city in darkness. She stalked through the night now, moving in silence, scarcely able to see much at all. Occasionally she lit the empty streets and alleys with a small conjured flare to gather her bearings, slicing through the humid night with a mild yellow flame that danced to her whims. Each block was empty; sometimes there were rodents.

She yawned. Whenever she went on errands for Silvia she felt gripped by exhaustion; only when it was time to act did Esmeralda's heart start to pound, did her hands start to shake with adrenaline and fear. Until she was looking her target in the eyes, she mostly just felt bored, haunting lonely streets as she hunted, bathed in darkness, the summer nights drawing longer and longer as she stalked.

When she reached the rift, that great chasm that split the town in two, she gazed over the side of the flimsy wooden bridge as she crossed it. The lack of anything within the rift, like darkness without itself, reminded her of Silvia's

magic, that unnatural light that now lived inside her, too, always itching at the tips of her fingers like an urge she couldn't resist. Growing uneasy she quickened her pace across the bridge and hurried into the high, narrow streets of the northern district.

Sweat slicked her arms as she ran, murmurs of conversations brushing just past her ears as she skulked beneath windows and past closed doors. When she reached a small, crooked cabin at the top of a small hill she crept up to the side of it, where slits of light were visible through gaps in the wood. Esmeralda pressed her ear close to the wall; she heard someone moving around, but otherwise it was silent. Excitement surging, confident the person was alone, and sure of her own abilities, Esmeralda walked right up to the front door and kicked it open. With a sharp *crack* it swung into the long, flickering shadows of the cabin.

Esmeralda, at Silvia's behest, had done many of these jobs before, relying on superior skill and instincts to accomplish them. But as Esmeralda's eyes found her target lurking in a dark corner of the small hut, it was this woman - the subject of Silvia's wrath - who hurled an enormous column of flame towards the entrance of her own home.

Esmeralda had no time to dodge; acting mostly on instinct she raised her hands, which were cloaked in light, and absorbed the shock of the blast with her own magic. It was a move of pure desperation, and as her own spell reacted with the woman's it exploded, throwing Esmeralda hard against the ground as savage fire shot forth into the cabin. Narrowly avoiding incineration, the woman came streaking out of the house, a blur in the night.

Staggering to her feet Esmeralda found the woman coming towards her and, with eerie speed and preternatural calm, conjured a small pillar of light between her hands. Wielding it like a spear she heaved it through the air in one furious motion; the woman, unprepared for such a deft attack, raised her arms helplessly as Esmeralda's magic pierced through her chest, taking with it fragmented parts of her midsection that trailed behind her as she stumbled, limp, onto the ground in front of her house. The spear itself dissipated on impact.

Where the spear had thrust through the air, glimmering particles of silver were visible, a residual trail left by the magic's power; they sparkled for a moment in the raging flames that consumed the woman's house, and briefly Esmeralda saw the light dance before her, roaring reds and oranges swallowing the silver particles of Esmeralda's attack, magic reacting with magic, violent beauty raging in the night.

As the fire and light dissipated, the magical energies having run their course, Esmeralda collapsed to her knees, burying sobs of pain against the dusty soil beneath her.

Agony radiated out from her hands through the rest of her body; it felt like her soul was burning. The woman she'd erased from existence, whose corpse now rested barely a meter away, had disappeared also from her mind; all she could think of now was fire, an impossible burning lighting her up like a scarecrow. Hot tears fell from her eyes and sweat slicked her lips as she panted against the ground.

For a long time she lay there; it was all she could do to remain conscious. Eventually she was able to bear the pain enough to stumble back through the humid night, soaked in sweat and stained with dirt, collapsing into Silvia's arms on her doorstep.

Silvia got her into bed and, observing the jagged red scars running from her palms to her elbows, made her sip a foul concoction that she said treated burns. It was thick like mud on Esmeralda's tongue, and tasted worse, but she had nothing left inside her to protest with. Quietly, fighting not to wretch, she drank what Silvia gave her and gradually felt her pain subside.

When she'd recovered enough to talk she murmured her way through what happened, dead-eyed, as Silvia sat with her, stroking her hair. Afterwards they were both silent a long time; when Silvia finally spoke her voice was quiet, but severe.

"You were overconfident and you failed. It nearly cost you your life."

The older woman leaned in close to Esmeralda, her voice barely audible even in the silent bedroom.

"You disappointed me, pet. And you almost let yourself be taken from me."

Esmeralda felt that with each of Silvia's words another stake was driven into her heart. Tears began to form in her vermilion eyes, dull with exhaustion, as Silvia stood and began to leave the room. When she reached the doorway she cast a glance back at Esmeralda and spoke sternly.

"Never let that happen again, pet."

Esmeralda watched her go and then, left by herself, began to weep hard into her pillow, muffling her anguish in the dim candlelight of Silvia's bedroom.

Esmeralda's eyes shot open, and almost immediately she turned to her left, where Astrid lay. She watched the young woman's chest rise and fall, gently, as she breathed; like this, the phantom light of the moon illuminating her face, Esmeralda passed the rest of the night, too anxious to sink fully into sleep again and too tired to fully dwell in the silence of the waking world. Her vision blurred off-and-on as she dozed until sunrise.

---

“Love? Are you OK?” Astrid’s voice lilted through the air behind Esmeralda; for a moment, she was confused why Silvia had called her “love”. Grimacing, she rubbed her eyes and stood up on the balcony with a grunt. “I’m fine. Just bad sleep.”

“Your nightmares.” Astrid’s voice was dour.

“Yeah. I’m just tired. I’ll be fine.”

“You always say that, whenever something’s wrong.”

“And I’m always fine! You can trust me, Astrid.” Esmeralda brushed past her partner and stepped through the large window; she let the blanket fall from her shoulders and began to change out of her sleeping clothes. Astrid went promptly downstairs without a word.

It was an academy day for Esmeralda and she tromped into the kitchen in a foul mood. Astrid spoke to her as she entered.

“I’m going to keep studying the artifact. Do you think anyone at the academy might know what it is?”

The question exhausted Esmeralda further. “No.”

Astrid looked surprised. “Oh, OK.” She paused, opening and closing her mouth as though unable to speak. When she spoke again her voice was quiet. “Be safe today.”

“I will be.” Esmeralda strode outside and shut the door with a *clack* behind her.

Her coat, heavy and grey and frayed in various places, whipped behind her as she rode, the bright blue sky unfurling before her on the highway. Her motor pummeled her ears on the way, and she walked into the academy with a splitting headache and her hair splayed out behind her in tangled strands. She fought with it as she walked to her classroom.

She stormed in bleary-eyed to find her students had already assembled. Esmeralda took a moment to gather her bearings, remembering it was an examination day.

Her anger seemed to simmer now, extinguished and replaced by sad resignation. Exam days meant she dueled each of her students one by one, testing them on how well they used the concepts and techniques they’d learned recently in a combat situation. Esmeralda knew she’d pass everyone; she was in no mood to actually keep track of how they did, and whenever this happened

she just fought them out of obligation and gave everyone reasonably believable marks. Rask's students were natives and refugees - no one was here for rigorous academics. She rolled up her sweater sleeves.

Barking out commands to her class she stood at one end of the room and called the first student up. From here it was automatic; Esmeralda could rely on old instincts that had been drilled in over innumerable years and fights, movements that were permanently etched into her muscles and mind, and she could detach herself from what was happening, like she was monitoring a machine. The combat would unfold like it always did; as a series of images, a sequence of actions Esmeralda was witnessing, not experiencing.

Everything before her happened like a performance as one by one she coolly dispatched challenger after challenger, moving deceptively quick, her body reacting on a hair and each of her actions somehow building towards the next, like she were writing a symphony. There was little excess in her movements. Between fights Esmeralda used her rest time to stand and stare blankly out the door of the room, aching to lose herself amongst the scattered clouds in the thin, rectangular sky. She felt sick.

When she left the room at the end of the day the head of the school, Rask's mayor, was waiting for her with words he was eager to share. A severe-looking man with his lips twisted into a deep frown, he spoke forcefully, all at once. Esmeralda, still numb from her class, let the words wash over her: she had started her class late again; this was the fourth, or fifth time this quarter; how did she think this was acceptable?

Esmeralda was dumbfounded. Her mouth hung open. "Well, of course I don't think it's acceptable-"

"Then why have you let it happen? This isn't the *first problem* we've had with you, Ms. Vicario-"

His tone made Esmeralda snap. "Keep my name out of your mouth, worm," she scowled. He was treating her like a child; she wouldn't stand for it.

The man was aghast. He spoke in a dramatic whine. "*Ms. Vicario!* That was not an acceptable way to address your *superior!* Need I remind you we *already* offer you special treatment?"

"Special treatment? What is that supposed to mean?"

"Hmph! Well! For one, we require you here a full two days less per week than the other instructors!" The man puffed his chest out, clearly growing brave. He seemed to be uttering a speech he'd rehearsed many times in his head. "And the rest of them help out with the work around town! We don't make you do

that, and we pay you directly in food instead of coin - and we let you *gallivant around* with that little runaway of yours-

This invocation of Astrid set Esmeralda's insides boiling, and for just a moment she saw it, a flicker of an image as clear as the summer sea, of what she could do to the man. It would be easy; he was neither a fighter nor a particularly gifted mage; she could whip up some clever little spell - maybe turn the wind into razors - and she'd gash open his throat; his dull eyes would widen just how everyone's did, when they realized all at once what the pretty young girl standing on their doorstep, or trailing them down the alley, or lurking in the shadows of their home had done to them, something so immense and final as to be unbelievable, even as they collapsed and felt their own lives slip away from them. She could do it, and calmly walk away, and get on her bike, and no one here would ever see her again. And if they found her, she'd kill them too.

"-and you can't even meet our *basic* standards of conduct? That's simply not acceptable, Ms. Vicario." He clearly relished saying her name like that now, his own pathetic act of war, about as barbarous as he could dream to get. He was breathing quite hard as he finished his rant.

Esmeralda stared down at him, bored. The savage feeling had passed her, and with it went her interest in the conversation. She brushed past him on her way out of the building.

"Ms. Vicario! Where do you think you're going?"

"Home!" She spat behind her. "To my little runaway!" The heavy wooden door of the building swung shut as she strode towards her bike. She did not wait to hear what else her boss had to say.

She arrived home to Astrid at the kitchen table, immersed in a book. Esmeralda said hello and Astrid asked her if she was hungry; she was, and they ate supper. Astrid returned to reading; Esmeralda, exhausted and at wit's end, curled up in bed and lay there motionless as the sun set and the moon rose. Time passed by in a blink, as though it applied differently to her now.

Eventually, basked in the silver glow of the moon, Astrid got into bed, and detecting weight behind her Esmeralda closed her eyes and sank uneasily into a murky slurry of sleep.

---

"I'm home, pet."

Silvia shut the heavy door behind her. Esmeralda was sitting by the fireplace, Pru at her feet. The fox stood to greet Silvia, who tussled her head.

Esmeralda watched the scene unfold with a smile. "Welcome home, Vi."

Silvia kissed her and ran a hand down the side of her face; Esmeralda felt her skin tingle. Her eyes tracked Silvia as the older woman walked over to the fireplace and began stacking wood inside.

“It’s freezing in here. How warm do you run, pet?”

Esmeralda frowned. “I told you I don’t like being teased about that.”

Silvia prodded at the logs until they began to blaze. She turned towards Esmeralda, her golden eyes glowing in the fresh firelight. She drew close; Esmeralda felt her breath tickle her lips.

“I have something special for you tonight.”

Esmeralda felt her heart begin to race, washing away the bitterness Silvia’s comment had inspired. The older woman’s voice dropped. “Just take care of an important job first, and then we can be together.” They kissed.

“What do you need?”

Silvia bared her fangs and whispered into Esmeralda’s ear. The words tickled as she heard them, like the bite of a venomous creature. Silvia kissed her ear and pulled away.

“Make it quick, pet. I miss you when you’re gone.”

Silvia began to stroke Pru’s fur, cooing over her freshly cleaned coat. Esmeralda stood and, propelled by some powerful inner force, swept silently into the night.

Dusk had quickly descended over the city and the sky smudged dark blue to light pink off in the horizon. Esmeralda’s breath hung ghost-like in front of her as she threw the hood of her cloak up and hurried down the dark road, her footsteps clattering off the pavement.

By the time she reached the place Silvia specified, night’s black grip had closed around the city; the streets were deserted, as people fled the cold by fires inside. Esmeralda felt sweat beading on her forehead as she walked up to the front door. Grim-faced she stepped forward and, with a silent blast of magic, splintered the wooden door of the home. She stepped inside with another spell at the ready; when her eyes adjusted to the dim light of the room and she saw what awaited her, she extinguished it immediately.

Sitting before her, hands bound behind her back, eyes wide and glittering with tears, sat Astrid, looking as she had when she’d first appeared at the academy in Rask - just a little younger and fresher-faced than she was now, honey-gold hair cut shorter and tucked behind her ears, gorgeous dress of white linen draped



over her small frame. She smiled a little at the hooded figure lurking in the doorway.

The sound that escaped Esmeralda's lips was not one she consciously made, nor did it sound very human. But Astrid responded to it in a tender, wounded voice.

"Hi, Es."

Esmeralda couldn't speak; she could barely form thoughts. All she managed, weakly, was a gasp.

"No."

Astrid giggled. "Come on, love. I know it's you."

"No, please." Esmeralda sank to her knees; her eyes hadn't left Astrid, bound as a prisoner in this cold, empty room, left alone to wait for her death with no comfort or signs of hope.

"No. No..."

Astrid spoke again, with an edge to her tone. It seemed to require great effort for her to say. "I know what you're here to do, Es. It's OK. If it's for you, I won't resist."

Somewhere Esmeralda found dark amusement in the notion of Astrid - gentle little bookworm, light as a feather soaking wet - resisting in any way Esmeralda, who knew fouler magic than the young girl could even conceive of, the kind they didn't write about in books.

Mostly she remained numb, her mind drowning in disbelief.

"No." She hurled questions through her mind, trying to make sense of what was happening. Why would Silvia have sent her here? Wouldn't she have known? Of course she knew. Was this a test? Esmeralda felt like her lungs had filled with cement. She realized her cheeks were wet with tears.

"It's OK, Es. I know it feels good." Esmeralda wished Astrid would stop smiling. "Just do it. I'm OK, if it's for you."

Esmeralda couldn't move. She shook her head. She barely heard anything Astrid was saying, consumed in her own thoughts; of the other students at the academy, and the faculty, what they all murmured just loud enough for her to hear when she passed them; and what her neighbours had said when they caught her with a neighbour, once as kids and again as teenagers, drowning every single word she said as soon as it was spoken; and what people had said to her with elbows and insults before she'd gotten big enough to start fights

and win them and caught Silvia's attention; and what the people in Rask had said when Astrid had turned up at the lighthouse-

"I'm a monster," The words tumbled out of her lips; they'd gathered too much momentum to be smothered in her throat like all the rest. She began to sob. "I'm vile. I'm a monster."

Astrid was silent, wearing the same resigned expression she'd had the whole time. Esmeralda was still shaking her head.

"I'm a monster. I like it," She blinked through tears at the ground she huddled over, where her hands were balled into fists. "I like it. I deserve this. I deserve it all."

She raised her head to Astrid, who responded warmly. "Do whatever you need to, Es. It's alright."

Esmeralda felt as though she were caught in a cyclone, powerless to do anything but get tossed around by the whims of nature. Whatever she wanted didn't matter; she no longer controlled herself. On trembling legs she stood, her eyes wide in terror and confusion. Astrid's gaze was luminous in the dark room.

"Go ahead, love. I'm just like all the rest."

Esmeralda's body shook as a furious light, barely controlled, began to blaze in her hand. In one swift motion she brought that burning fury down upon Astrid, who didn't move, only gasped barely audibly as the magic pierced through her body and brought her life to a close. And as it happened, as Astrid's jade-green eyes showed the same look of disbelief Esmeralda had seen so many times before, she felt herself filled with something ancient and feral, something clinging to her bones like moss, her destiny, a brand upon her soul -

Esmeralda awoke his time with a scream, and Astrid was roused frantic beside her. All Esmeralda could say was that she'd had a nightmare; and shivering, body covered in goosebumps, she clung to the hand Astrid offered her, bringing it up close to her chest and clutching it tightly through the rest of the night.

---

The days ahead brought no revelations for Esmeralda and Astrid, only further nightmares. Esmeralda felt herself immersed into a separate world than the one she was physically in, and it changed her. Each night she would cleave someone's intangible inner self clean open to dig something foul out, or blast open their bodies to solve a problem once and for all, or do some other unspeakable thing, and she'd wake up screaming, moaning, sweating, with her heart thundering against her ribs.

Sometimes she woke Astrid up inadvertently; other times she remained still and silent, desperate to jostle her partner awake but forbidding herself to do so. Esmeralda kept constant private vigil for herself; she never told Astrid about her dreams or what was weighing on her, and after enough increasingly firm rebuttals Astrid stopped asking.

An increasingly irritable Esmeralda spent most of her time lying on the lighthouse balcony, staring at the sea. Astrid, still focused on the artifact, didn't pester her; at most she'd bring her something for supper, which she'd leave with quiet words by the window. Esmeralda would nibble on whatever it was until she felt too sick to continue; eventually Astrid would lay down to sleep, and after a long pause Esmeralda would join her, shivering beneath the moon-soaked sheets.

Every night, like this, Esmeralda lay down to sleep. Dreading in her heart another round of nightmares, yet unable to will herself awake any longer, her body would shut down; and before long she would be thrashing about in her dreams.

Yet, one night, no dreams ever came. Esmeralda awoke, lightly dazed, to the soft glow of the morning sun cast across her face, and the autumn sky a deep sapphire that stretched across the horizon and bled together with the sea below it. Feeling taxed but rested, Esmeralda dressed herself and went downstairs.

To her surprise, Astrid wasn't there. She frowned, trying not to worry; Astrid was always here. But she's an adult, Esmeralda thought; she can want some alone time. It wasn't like her to leave without a word, but that wasn't so unreasonable; she's not a prisoner. She'd probably be just around back anyway.

Esmeralda opened the front door and immediately stopped in her tracks. Her bike - the one Astrid had quit on learning to drive almost immediately, preferring instead to cling to Esmeralda whenever she had to go anywhere - was gone. Sprinting upstairs she began to worry; and looking to her desk she realized the key for her bike was gone, as was the artifact.

The artifact? Esmeralda shook her head, trying to jostle her thoughts straight. She couldn't worry about that now; it didn't matter why Astrid was gone, just *where* she had gone. Rushing around the room Esmeralda assembled a smattering of necessities, throwing them into a bag. Then she set about trying to find Astrid.

Wracking her brain for some way to locate her, Esmeralda decided to beg. With panic assailing her heart and unsteady hands she scribbled out a series of symbols over several inches of parchment and stood in the center of them, outside, holding one of Astrid's books, something well-worn Esmeralda had grabbed off the shelf. Opening it Esmeralda saw, in familiar neat scrawl on the inside cover, the owner's name - *Astrid I. Hakala*.

Blinking away tears, with worry and remorse behind her words, Esmeralda clutched the book to her chest and began to beg for the world to tell her where Astrid had gone.

She begged the sea, waves roaring as it was assaulted by churning winds; she begged the wind as it whipped through her unkempt hair, sending her curls flying like a dark shawl about her head. She begged the trees - beginning to die now - that hung above the shattered road, and the unknowable sky as vast and blue as the sea, and the wispy autumn clouds rocketing through it like angelic birds. She begged the ground underfoot, asking only for an answer - *Where is Astrid?*

Finally, mercifully, Esmeralda began to feel a familiar tug at her heart, as though it were lassoed, a dull ache that pulled her towards wherever Astrid was, like a compass. Returning the book Esmeralda rushed back out of the lighthouse, feeling her muscles burning as she sprinted north, down the same old road her & Astrid had ridden together all the time, and which the young woman had apparently now ridden alone. With each step that hammered the broken pavement beneath her, Esmeralda missed her bike more.

Esmeralda danced around debris as she moved, and the pull grew stronger; and eventually as it began to shift directions in her chest so did she, clambering up the steep hill that separated the old highway from thick woods. Covered in sweat, her steps began to feel plodding; her stomach twisted into a brutal knot. More than once she stumbled over the rough terrain, twisted an ankle, scraped her hands and knees on rocks and harsh thorns - but she couldn't let herself stop.

When she did find Astrid it was under a tree, partially buried in underbrush, hardly conscious. She had bruises and small cuts on the side of her face, and more alarmingly blood had soaked through the left side of her shirt. Esmeralda could barely register any of it; she moved too fast for her mind to have time to think, kneeling down and immediately tending to Astrid's wound, dressing it with bandages and gently tipping water into her mouth so she could drink. Astrid's hair was matted with dirt, leaves, and twigs, and her clothes were torn and covered in dirt. She smiled weakly at Esmeralda as she cared for her, and after some time spoke hoarsely.

"I knew you'd come for me."

"Oh songbird of *course* I came for you. I told you I'd never leave you." Esmeralda spoke rapidly; she felt that if she spent too much time trying to get out a word, a sob would escape instead. She had to present herself as calmly as possible. She continued tending to Astrid.

When she'd cleaned Astrid up Esmeralda took a deep breath and looked around at the thick vegetation surrounding them. She laid a hand on Astrid's shoulder. "Astrid, do you know where the bike is?"

Astrid nodded, just barely. "It's back on the road. I had to leave it."

Esmeralda was burning to know how Astrid had gotten there and why she had left in the first place; she felt her mind in a tug-of-war between peppering Astrid with questions and keeping silent. Answers had to wait, she knew; they could still be in danger, and she had to get Astrid home.

Aching but newly energized Esmeralda forbade Astrid from speaking again and took off at a frantic sprint, eventually coming upon the edge of the woods and the road Astrid had referenced. The motorcycle was there, tossed onto its side, clearly damaged by whatever had happened to it. Gingerly she lifted it and started the engine, riding it up the road a ways; it had been dinged up, but it could still ride. She felt a weight lift off her chest. Unable to maneuver it through the thicket Esmeralda hid it underneath some bushes and ran back to where Astrid was.

She hadn't moved; Esmeralda gave her some more water and stroked her hair. "I found the bike. I'm going to get you home now, OK?"

Astrid nodded and with some effort Esmeralda got her upright. Hitching her up onto her back Esmeralda took off at a steady march, eyes darting from place to place to make sure her footing was steady. Jostled about as they walked, gasps of pain escaped Astrid's lips, each one plunging into Esmeralda's ears like a dagger into her heart. She went as fast as she could, her body blazing with exhaustion, her arms clung firmly around Astrid's legs, the woman's weight yanking at her muscles as she walked.

When they reached the road Esmeralda sat Astrid on her lap and drove them back at a slow pace, the bike chugging along, occasionally locking up or lurching. Esmeralda did her best to hold it steady, unable to speed up even as each passing moment on the bike felt glacial and agonizing. Astrid's blood-soaked side rested against her arm, and the viscous dampness of it made her skin feel like it was on fire. Every new cry of pain that escaped Astrid's lips felt like a knife across her stomach.

When they finally made it home Esmeralda brought Astrid inside, dragged their cot downstairs, and laid her on it. She changed her clothes and bandages, cleaning her as she did so, and nibbled on fruit with her. Astrid was mostly silent, and after eating fell asleep. Esmeralda stepped outside, shutting the door quietly behind her. Falling forward more than walking, she sank to her knees in front of the lighthouse and wept as hard as she ever had, bitter tears painting her face as the sun fell in the sky and the growing cold stung her cheeks.

Later that night, after her tears had dried - and with Astrid still asleep Esmeralda performed one of the most complex spells she knew, a charm that erected a great magical barrier around the lighthouse, sealing it off from outside threats. To successfully cast it took everything Esmeralda had left inside and more; returning to the kitchen and sitting down at the table in full dress, she put her head down and slept, Astrid safe in the cot at her feet.

---

It was late afternoon the next day before Astrid spoke at length. She sat at the table, sipping a cup of medicine Esmeralda had brewed. It was piping hot, and she handled it gingerly. Esmeralda's eyes stung and her gaze scanned lazily around the room. She strained to enunciate her words clearly enough for Astrid to understand.

“Can you tell me what happened, songbird? Do you remember?”

Astrid did not react immediately. When she spoke her voice was shaky and wounded. “I think I remember everything.”

Esmeralda waited for her to speak, a blanket of dread settling over her heart. Astrid drank from her mug with slow, careful movements.

“Last night, I took the artifact and left on the motorcycle.”

“What? Why? Where did you go?”

Astrid closed her eyes, letting Esmeralda's questions hang in the air. Immediately Esmeralda felt ashamed of her reaction; and the longer the silence lasted the more crushing and embarrassing it felt. Astrid sipped her medicine.

“Es, I need you to let me talk.”

Esmeralda nodded and muttered an apology. Astrid continued.

“I took the artifact because I thought it was giving you nightmares. I thought it was affecting you somehow. I got it out of the house to see if it would help.”

Esmeralda chewed on her question for a moment before asking it. “Why didn't you ask me for permission?”

“What?...Why? When? You wouldn't let me talk to you...You stopped talking to me. I thought if I asked you about it, you'd get mad and refuse and then I'd never get rid of it.”

“I would never dismiss you like that, s-”

“You just did!” Astrid spoke forcefully and the effort made her cough; Esmeralda felt like her skin was burning as she watched Astrid tremble, clutching at her ribs. She said nothing and waited for Astrid to speak again.

“Es, you shut me out for days. You wouldn’t tell me anything - not about your dreams, not what you were even trying to do with that thing when you tried your...whatever it was.” Astrid shook her head; her eyes glittered with tears. “Just like you always do. You never let me in.”

“Please, Astrid, please stop.” Esmeralda barely got the words out. “I’m sorry, Astrid. I’m sorry. I know I was wrong. But please, I’ll do anything you need me to. Just - I’m sorry.” The words fell out of her like something had broken inside her. Astrid began to cry more fully, tears trailing down her cheeks in silence. Dark circles nested under her eyes, Esmeralda noticed, and her colour looked bad.

“Thank you, Esmeralda. I know you want to help me. But I want to help you, too, *really* help you, and I can’t unless you let me.” She drank the last of the medicine in her mug. “I was going west, just to go. I was going to drive until sun up and then come back.”

Astrid paused. Esmeralda was full of questions, but she stifled herself.

“I was riding - slowly - and all of a sudden something smashed into me. I didn’t even see it, I just felt it hit me.” She winced; Esmeralda’s eyes darted to her left side, where she’d been bleeding. “It was strong, whatever it was. It bowled me over, completely off the bike, and the next thing I knew I was on the ground and hurt. I crawled out of the road because I thought it’d be safer in the woods, waiting for you.”

Esmeralda took a deep breath, squeezing her own hands together. “Is that all that happened?”

Astrid nodded.

Esmeralda looked down at the cup of tea she’d been ignoring, imagining its deep ocher colour running kilometers deep. “It was an animal that attacked you. There’s a bite on your side; that’s why you were bleeding.”

Astrid looked a little surprised, but said nothing. Esmeralda sensed that her energy was dropping.

“Astrid, thank you for doing all that. I think you were right - the nightmares stopped yesterday. I think it was that thing.”

Astrid smiled wide; it had been a long time since Esmeralda had seen her do so. “That’s good. I’m glad.”

As their conversation petered out and Astrid's energy faded, Esmeralda gently took her hand and helped her back into the cot, where Esmeralda stroked her hair until she fell asleep.

Watching the orange sunlight of dusk grow fainter on the walls Esmeralda's mind wandered; she thought of Silvia, Pru, and herself, as Astrid's chest rose and fell steadily under the blankets, and her hair hung soft between Esmeralda's fingers.

Placing a hand softly against Astrid's freckled face, Esmeralda began to cry.

"I'll tell you," she choked. "I'll tell you everything. I promise."