

SOLDIERS HAVE COME to the village.

Ren looked up, avoiding Barlow's words, resting her eyes on the pines that crowded the sky, swamp-green, thick, heavy with resin that stuck to skin and cleared throats, nostrils, eyes.

Barlow was sitting on a large rock. When she didn't answer, he kept talking.

They're after something—they won't say what. But it's up here. On the mountain.

Ravens called from the trees, deep rasps, long and loud. Ren watched them hop, black patterns in the branches. Pine needles carpeted the ground beneath them, giving way in small glades to grass, stones, fallen branches, thick moss. The light was weak, interrupted everywhere by the trees and their shadows. Ren stretched her neck and stared at a pine cone.

It doesn't matter.

It does if they find you.

She walked to the rock he was sitting on and lay down what she was carrying: deerskins. Five, all small, but clean and neat and cured, free of blood and thick with fur that seemed to glisten in the green-dark light. In her swift movements, in the walking and laying down of the skins, she made it clear that the conversation was over, that she wouldn't be speaking any more about these soldiers.

Barlow did not like this, and with his long look of worry and the crossing of his arms he made sure she knew it; but, as with everything Ren did, he accepted it. He let his narrow, bearded face relax as he pushed himself off the rock and began inspecting the skins, running his fingers through the fur, murmuring about the quality, small imperfections, price, the coming winter.

Ren waited.

The ravens cawed on. The light weakened further. Finally, Barlow turned and offered two packets of vitamins, a handful of seeds, a woollen blanket and a pair of leather boots in exchange for the pelts. Ren nodded. Barlow undid the pack sitting beside the rock and dug out the goods.

Ren kicked off her old boots—worn, thin-soled, full of holes—and slid on the new ones. She threw the blanket over her shoulders, feeling its itch, its warmth, and put the vitamin packets and seeds in her pockets. She wriggled her torso, shifting the weight of the blanket.

More of the same next time?

He nodded. Any skins are good. Deer. Rabbit. Trout and salmon too, if you smoke them. Mushrooms. You know.

Ren nodded. One week.

All right.

They stood there, each waiting to see if the other had anything else to say. When Ren stayed silent Barlow opened his mouth, ready to speak about something—probably the soldiers again, almost definitely the soldiers—but as Ren saw his lips part she turned and walked away. She left him by the rock and pushed into the trees, treading a trail marked only in her head: stones, moss, logs and cones, connected by the carpet of needles and her memory and nothing more. A trail that couldn't be followed. Behind her, Barlow hefted the skins and turned to the lower slope.

She raced the dropping sun through the trees, walking slow, firm. Up the slope she climbed, on dark grass, over scree fields, through lit clearings and across cold creeks, surrounded

always by the towering pines as their needles slid and crunched beneath her fresh boots. Other trees jostled upwards in places—craggy spruces, spreading beeches and the patchwork trunks of skinny, twiggy birches. She'd learned to recognise them all, even the slender silver firs that at first had seemed almost indistinguishable from the mountain pines until she saw how, at greater heights, they stood tall and lonely and noble. But it was the pines that dominated the slopes, in groves and clusters that to Ren were endless and ever welcome.

After an hour she began following the course of a steep stream, at times using her hands to pull herself over the rocks and roots that bordered the water. For another hour she climbed like this: careful, tiring work, avoiding the icy stream, scraping palm skin, birthing blisters against the leather of her boots. The sun fell further and the trees dropped in height. Finally she tacked away from the water. At a sharp angle she picked her way through the forest, and from there it was only a few minutes before she stopped at a clearing beside a high, sheer cliff.

This clearing wasn't like the others lower on the mountain. Where they featured long grass, flat mushrooms and scattered stones, this one was neat and free of wildness. Logs sat at its extremities, and in one corner a patch of ploughed soil shot rows of foreign vegetation upwards. It ended beside the cliff, where a black cave was gouged into the rock face. Inside the cave's mouth, where the diameter narrowed, an uneven wall of logs and sticks, caked with mud and clay, was wedged against the rock. An opening in this wall revealed nothing of the dark interior.

Ren stopped. She drew in the cold high air, its clearing resin scent, and began mentally preparing herself for the night

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ahead. She needed to drink water, to store the seeds on a dry ledge in her cave, to build a fire by twisting firesticks over cottony tinder. She needed to take her boots off and let her fresh blisters breathe. She needed to eat yams and dried deer meat, and she needed to rest, to lie down, to pull the warm itch of the new blanket up to her chin and sleep.

But she couldn't focus. Her mind wouldn't settle on any one task; her thoughts kept dancing back to the same thing: soldiers. Gun-gripping, fast-marching, unsmiling soldiers, and everything she knew soldiers did and meant. Food, she told herself. Water. Rest. Sleep.

The sun fell behind the mountain. Stars winked bright above her. She felt her pulse trip, her lungs pump. Black boots kicked at the backs of her eyes.