

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

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.

IN THE FIVE years since she'd come to the mountain, Ren had almost died on many occasions. Early on, starvation nearly killed her. Then she nearly died of malnutrition, and the fevers and sickness that came with it. She nearly froze. In a cool, happy stream she nearly drowned. She was nearly gored by a boar, nearly kicked to death by a cornered buck. She nearly poisoned herself with hemlock tea. She nearly fell from a cliff three times, and narrowly missed being crushed by tumbling rocks on many others. All her preparations, her research, all the books she'd read: none of it prepared her for the sheer rush of death that comes with being in the wilderness.

But she did not die, thanks to the shelter she found in the cave, to the foraging and survival skills she cobbled together, to her thick vein of stubbornness. And mostly she didn't die because of Barlow.

She had met him a few weeks after she arrived. She had not yet discovered the cave, and was wandering between shelters, eating her supplies, coming to the realisation that the mountain was going to kill her. On a low slope she saw him with his son foraging for mushrooms, maybe nuts. She saw that he moved slowly, calmly, that he was careful with his footsteps and voice, that he was patient and kind towards the boy, a loud spinning top of a child. Soon they stopped foraging and went back to the village, and Ren felt something hook in her chest as she watched them leave.

Days later she saw him again in the meadow, again with his son. She watched and waited, wondering if they would climb higher. The third time she saw him he was alone, angling for trout with a bamboo pole. He caught a single fish in an hour

of casting, and as he packed his bag and turned to leave Ren stepped out from behind a tree, revealing herself without planning to, without thinking about it. He turned; he was coming towards her; she could have stayed hidden but something flicked in her head, a snap of loneliness or need, a snap that travelled all the way to her hip, her knees, and she stepped out before him.

If he was surprised—and he must have been surprised—he didn't show it. He greeted her and asked no personal questions. They spoke about nothing in particular for a while before Ren, conscious of his meagre haul, offered him a handful of the milk-cap mushrooms she'd been collecting. He put them in a side pocket of his backpack, then opened another section and pulled something out, which he offered to Ren. It looked like a piece of wool. After a pause she took it, feeling beneath her fingers the fibre, warm and soft. She stretched it out and saw that it was a woollen hat.

For the mushrooms, Barlow said. And for winter.

It set a simple precedent. They would meet at a large rock in the pines and trade in ways that kept Ren alive, although Barlow never admitted that these trades were weighted in her favour. For mushrooms and berries he traded a rod of steel to sharpen her knife. For a crown of antlers she found on a buck skeleton he gave her a head torch and a pack of batteries. Once she began catching deer in her traps she began asking for things in advance—boots, vitamins and vegetable seeds.

Ren knew that most of these trades were more beneficial to her—a basket of nuts was never a fair swap for a pair of fleece gloves—but she chose not to let her pride get in the way of these meetings, their connection. And sometimes the trades did go

in Barlow's favour: once she found a large angular rock that gave off a strange glow, with multiple points of light, varying in colour from white to pink to yellow, glittering out of its pocked surface. She gave it to Barlow in exchange for a tube of disinfectant cream. As his hand closed around the rock she saw his eyes, usually calm and guarded, gleam with wild knowledge. He stammered a thanks, asked if she knew what it was, offered to give her more for it, much more, but she refused. She did not mind, and she did not need more.

He never asked why she was living on the mountain, where she had come from. And Ren never asked him anything about what he did, how he lived, if he had a wife and if that wife was the mother of his son, even though she found herself wondering about this, late at night and in the glow of morning.

They didn't talk about his son, either; she had asked Barlow not to bring him to their meetings. Of all the people she did not want to be around, children were at the top of the list: children and young men, even one that seemed as harmless and light-hearted as the boy she'd seen zooming about on the slopes. She knew what young men could do, no matter how inane they appeared, how joyful and innocent. She knew how they could change and be changed. She knew in her head and blood and hands, and she wanted none of it—none at all, never again.

REN WOKE UP hot. Sweat was sliding down the grooves of her ribs. She wasn't used to the new blanket's thickness, the density of its warmth. In the darkness she threw it off, stretched her legs and arms before standing up, wandering to her door of branches and out into the clearing.

The sun was up, the morning warm. At the stream she drank straight from the water, lying flat, dipping her chin in the current. The water sloshed in her stomach, shaking up her hunger, so she went back and grabbed some dried deer meat from one of the ledges at the back of the cave. Later on she would prepare a meal: usually yams and whatever other vegetables she'd grown, a handful of native thyme and more strips of tough meat, boiled in a metal pot she'd received from Barlow. During the day she might snack on nuts or berries, but this was usually enough: scraps of meat in the morning, and a pot of watery stew later on.

She returned to the stream to fill a dented metal bottle with water. A weak breeze touched her cheeks. The stream gurgled. A steadiness came over her. It wasn't until she began thinking about the rest of the day, about what she needed to do, that she remembered the soldiers.

There was nothing she could do. They might leave; they might already have gone; but once she remembered them she couldn't chase them from her thoughts.

She decided to spend the day being as active as possible, using tasks and work to keep her mind occupied. Her blisters throbbed, so she pulled on two pairs of socks before sliding on her new boots and setting off to the east. She walked through the forest, sticking to patches of shade and wherever possible

stepping on stones—a habit that reduced signs of her passing.

Soon she reached a creek that was wider than the stream by her cave. She wandered down its length, stopping at various points near small gullies she'd dug into the dirt beside the course of the water. She'd placed logs and rocks at critical points in the stream that channelled water into these gullies—water that was occasionally followed by unknowing trout. The gullies curved back into lower parts of the stream, where they were fenced off by sticks Ren had jammed into the riverbed, allowing water to pass through, but not fish.

This time there were no trout in her traps. She reset her waterways, using larger logs, and walked on. As she passed through the forest she stopped to pick up mushrooms, nuts and handfuls of the freshest, most fragrant pine needles, but mostly her stride was straight and fast. At the base of a rocky field she tacked south, coming eventually to a faint path in the trees. It was a deer trail. She stopped at a low bend, where the path wound past the thick trunk of an old pine. Here was another of her traps: a device of strained saplings, string and sharpened sticks. A spring-spear trap, or something like it; she'd memorised the design from a survival book she'd read before she came to the mountain.

It had been triggered. Leaves and dirt had been kicked over the trail, a tuft of fur stuck to one of the spikes, and a smear of rust-red blood ran down the wooden barb. She knelt down to reset it, taking care to position her body behind the spikes. The sapling bent under her grip. She reached for the string, straining the wood, tensing her arms, holding her breath with effort, when she heard rustling foliage. Footsteps. Voices.

The sounds were coming from a gully below her. She released the sapling slowly, leaving the trap unset, and lay flat on the ground, her body obscured by the tree but with a clear view of the gully. A minute passed. The noises grew louder, more frequent, and then their source was revealed: one, two, then five soldiers pushed through the trees about thirty metres away.

They were wearing standard camouflage clothing and rifles slung low on their shoulders. They were young men with fresh faces, red cheeks, bored eyes, moving easily and loudly in a loose column—all but for the soldier at the rear, who was a woman. Unlike the men she was treading softly, roving her eyes over the trees and not speaking. Her careful, elegant movements reminded Ren of dancers she'd seen, professional ones. Where the young men crashed, she flowed like water. The men were wearing army caps, but her head was uncovered, revealing a high auburn ponytail. Her lightly tanned face was unlined and expressionless, as if the world held no interest to her—as if the high trees, the rich scent, the clear streams and the looming dark cliffs were all unremarkable, not worth remembering.

The way she moved, the way she took it all in: Ren couldn't stop looking at her. The others were simply soldiers, like the ones she'd known before she left the city. Dangerous, even terrifying at times, but just soldiers: not unique or noticeable beyond the things they did, the things they were allowed and ordered to do. But this blank-faced woman, looking at so much and being affected by none of it: Ren had never seen a soldier like her. And then, still staring at her, at her high, smooth cheekbones and the sheen of sweat on her forehead, Ren had another thought, one

that came unbidden and unwelcome: this woman was young enough to be her daughter.

The soldiers stopped. Ren dropped her head. When she looked back up they had turned to face the young woman, who was speaking to them—words that Ren couldn't hear. When she finished they spread into a circle, put down their packs, and began slugging water from bottles and eating bars fished from their pockets.

So she was in charge, Ren thought. Some kind of officer. It made sense—she wasn't sure why, but it did. The intrigue that had been bubbling at the back of her neck fizzed higher, brighter, matched only by the fear that had been brewing beside it: fear that grew larger the longer she lay there, watching the young woman take small sips from a shining steel bottle.