

She hunts alone.

Slinking through the underbrush, her steel eyes scan the forest floor from beneath the shadow of a fur cowl. Cold morning rain falls from the dead, silver sky, slipping through the sparse forest canopy above.

She kneels deliberately, mindful of the pine needles and twigs on the ground. A careful hand reaches down, and her fingertips trace the clear edges of a hoof print in the rain-softened earth.

She closes her eyes and tilts her head slightly, inhaling slowly through her nose. The sounds of the forest and the smell of damp earth permeate her senses.

She drinks in her surroundings.

*There.*

Behind the sharp scent of pine, mixed with mud and rain, the faint, musky smell of deer.

“There you are,” she whispers.

Ren unshoulders her backpack, leaning it against a nearby evergreen for cover from the rain. She kneels and works at the lashings holding her crossbow to the pack. It comes free without a sound. Slipping the stirrup beneath her moccasin, she rises, pulling the bowstring up with both hands and letting her leg muscles do the work. She catches it in the second of three notches in the stock. Drawing a bolt from a pouch on her belt, she slides it along the flight groove until it rests against the string, held in place by a springy sliver of forged Dust.

Crossbow in hand, Ren slings her backpack over her shoulder and returns to the hunt, moving through the forest as quick and quiet as a hungry cat. She follows the broken line of hoof prints in the mud, listening. Watching. Testing the air. A few quiet moments later, a slight scraping sound catches her ear. She kneels and listens.

Ahead and off to her right, she hears the dry scraping again.

*Antlers.*

A smile finds its way to her lips.

She has always been better at this than most in Riverbend. The other hunters call her “blessed by the woods” when they think she is out of earshot. She isn’t often out of earshot.

Moving once more, crossbow raised and pressed into her shoulder, she gazes through the trees in search of her quarry. The scraping continues and grows louder as she advances. Movement catches her eye, and she crouches again. A young stag comes into view through the trees. It rubs its head vigorously against a tree trunk, shedding bloody strips of velvet from its small antlers.

Cautiously, she sidles around the trees, eyes down the stock of the crossbow, positioning the buck between the risers. Perhaps sensing its peril, it lifts its head and freezes—tail twitching, black eyes searching.

The damp forest falls silent.

Ren's lips part slightly, and she lets out a long, disciplined exhalation as she takes aim at the animal's heart. Just as the last of her breath is released, she squeezes the trigger.

The crossbow twitches in her hands and gives a subdued snapping sound as it launches the bolt.

Her aim is true.

The bolt whistles between the trees and disappears into the deer's ribcage.

The stag jolts, stumbles, and crashes away through wet underbrush. Ren is already moving.

She runs low and fast, crossbow in hand, following the path forged by the stag, eyes on a visible trail of blood. Branches whip at her shoulders. Mud slips beneath her moccasins. The rustling of ferns and snapping of twigs ahead slows, and Ren slows with it.

A muffled crash in the brush, then silence.

She hears only raindrops.

She doesn't have to walk far to find the stag, collapsed on the forest floor, one hind leg bent beneath it. Its flanks shudder once.

She moves in and kneels beside the animal, laying her crossbow on the ground and drawing her knife from her belt. She lays a hand on its chest, feeling no rise and fall of breath. No heartbeat pounding below the ribcage. She dips her head and holds a brief, solemn silence. A few breaths later, she nods and sets about preparing the carcass.

She works quickly and carefully. Her practiced hands slide the blade under hide and into the belly, avoiding the gut and bladder as she opens the animal. Warm steam and the smell of blood rise into the cold, wet air.

She pulls the entrails free of the carcass and lays them on the wet earth. The liver she keeps. The heart too, pierced by her bolt. Both go into a waxed hide bag from her pack, the mouth drawn tight with cord. The rest she leaves among the ferns.

By the time she is done, her forearms are slick to the elbow, blood thinned pink by the rainwater running over her skin. She wipes her hands and forearms on a patch of rain-dampened moss, then gathers dry pine needles from the base of a tree and rubs them over her skin, one arm and then the other.

She drags the stag by its forelegs a short way through the trees until she breaks out of the forest and into an open field. Waist-high grass stretches before her. Beyond it, on a rise, lies the old highway she means to reach. It is broken and heaved by roots, but still smoother than the forest floor.

Ren lets go of the deer and slings off her pack, taking up her hatchet. Near the edge of the field, she finds a stand of young pine saplings. She appraises them.

Finding one thick enough to hold the weight but thin enough to flex, she swings at its base. The wood gives with a wet, fibrous crack and folds into the grass. A second falls to her hatchet a moment later. She trims the branches with quick strokes, creating two straight poles that will form the frame of a sled.

She fells a third sapling and begins the work of clearing its branches and chopping it into smaller lengths to act as cross members for the sled. Returning to the deer, she cuts several long strips of hide from the deer's belly along her previous incision. Using these strips, she binds the longer poles near one end, crossing one another to make a tow point. At the other end, she flexes the poles inward until they run parallel to one another, affixing several of the shorter beams perpendicularly across these runners to hold them in place and provide a platform for the deer. Her fingers move fast and practiced, tugging each knot hard. The sled is rough, but it will hold.

She gathers a few of the larger needle-covered pine boughs and lays them across the frame. Then she rolls the deer onto the drag sled, grunting with effort as the lifeless body flops onto the bed of branches. With some twine from her pack, she binds the legs and cinches the body down so it will not slide free. She lashes her pack onto the sled as well. Its weight is negligible compared to the deer, but it will be nice to give her shoulders a break.

With a final, firm tug on the twine, Ren steps back and inspects her work. Rain patters on her hood as her eyes scan the knots holding the contraption together. She nods in approval and flexes her fingers, turning her gaze toward the rise again.

Not far.

Ren steps between the poles and, with a small grunt, lifts the far end of the sled, placing the crossed and lashed branches against her hips. She leans into them and starts to walk. The sled answers with a dull scrape over wet grass and mud.

She has nearly reached the old highway when an out-of-place flash of red catches her eye.

A faded red shape through the brush below the rise, canted nose-first into a tree as if it had leapt from the road and died there. Ren stops and squints through the rain.

*A car.*

Ren looks from the car to the deer, then back to the car. She presses her weight into the sled and changes direction, dragging her old prize to her new one.

The car is partially wrapped around a large tree, and collapsed in on itself. Piles of craggy, rust-caked Dust are covered by faded red panels. Ren has seen this before. The red panels—a hard and fibrous material—are impervious to the process that created the Dust. Underneath these panels, she knew, was a small fortune, and no small amount of risk.

She lowers the sled to the ground a few feet from the car and rummages through her pack. She pulls out a makeshift filter mask, made from tightly woven cloth—a material made specifically by the weavers of Riverbend for this purpose. She ties it over her mouth and nose, knotting it firm at the back of her head. From inside the pack she takes two squat jars with screw lids, cloudy with age—they're older than she is—but sound.

Dust lies piled in and around the remains of the car. As she approaches, yellowed white shapes become apparent inside the crumpled frame—bones. Ren kneels near the side of the car. Crusted-over piles of Dust lie encircled by cracked black rubber wheels. She pauses a moment to judge the wind, then shifts her position, putting it at her back as she squats in front of a Dust pile. Drawing her knife—itsself made from forged Dust—she uses the tip to score the surface.

The crust cracks softly.

She peels up a thin, rusted layer and sets it aside. Beneath it, the Dust is finer. Dark gray in the dry pockets, red-brown where water and air have worked into it. She leans away and watches, holding her breath.

A faint curl of gray particulate mist rises where she broke the surface. It twists in the rain-damp air and drifts away on the breeze.

Only then does she begin.

She works slowly, using the flat of her knife to scoop the fine Dust into her jar. She fills it a little at a time, occasionally tapping the jar with the back of her knife to settle the powder. She is careful to keep her hands clean and breathe shallowly as she works. She has seen members of the village die from Dust Lung. It's not pleasant.

When the first jar is filled nearly to the top, she screws the lid on tight and grabs the second jar. It is half full when instinct makes her pause.

She listens.

Raindrops. The soft tick of water onto the panels of the car. She slowly and silently screws the lid on the second jar and tenses as she senses a shift in the sounds of the forest. Subtle. Not something she can put her finger on.

The hair at the back of her neck rises beneath her damp hood. Her head lifts slowly. Through the smells of blood, wet earth, and metal, another scent finds her. She turns in a single motion, knife positioned up and ready in one hand.

The tiger is halfway out of the tall grass when their eyes meet. They both freeze.

It stands low, caught prowling toward the deer carcass. It isn't the biggest tiger she's ever seen, but it doesn't need to be. Its striped hide is darkened by rain, ribs visible under a patchy coat. The fur around its nostrils is stained gray, and thick ropes of saliva hang from its mouth as it bares its teeth.

The tiger growls. A wet, bubbly sound.

Dust Lung, Ren realizes.

She stills. Her heart pounds hard and fast, but her voice, when it comes, is low.

"Easy, Stripes."

The tiger's eyes stay on her. Yellow, sunken, and unblinking. It shifts with hesitation.

"Easy now," she says again, taking a step toward the deer carcass. The tiger barks a bubbly growl and lunges a half-step, smacking the ground with a weighty paw.

"Easy. Easy. I see you. I think we both know you're in no shape for a fight." She holds eye contact with the tiger, standing her ground.

Slowly, without sudden movement, she crouches beside the sled. The tiger tenses, lips peeling back. Ren continues to speak softly. "I know you're hungry. And I know you can't run very far with all that Dust in your lungs."

She tugs the cord lashing the waxed hide bag to the sled and pulls it free, the bottom of the bag now stained dark red from the heart and liver within. The tiger's growl thickens into what almost sounds like a cough.

Ren loosens the cord with her teeth and pulls the bag open. The liver slides into her palm, heavy and smooth.

She holds the liver out for a moment, letting the bag with the heart fall back to the sled. The tiger's eyes shift from hers to the large organ. While the tiger is looking at the liver, she quickly hurls it past the tiger, into the grass.

The tiger jerks toward the motion, then freezes again and looks back at her. For one long breath neither moves.

Then hunger wins.

It leaps after the thrown organ, vanishing into the wet grass.

Ren moves.

She snatches the jars from where they lie next to the car and quickly shoves them into her pack. Stealing a quick glance at the ruined car, she exhales in frustration. More Dust than she can carry waits in the dry pockets beneath those faded red panels. She can always come back.

She does not look back again. She lifts the sled and leans her hips into it with more urgency than before, making for the embankment leading up to the old highway.

Moments later, she crests the hill, and the broken gray slabs of the highway stretch before her, cracked and uneven. The sled runs easier here—but louder—rattling over cracks and gravel instead of soft dirt. Ren drags the deer onto the road and keeps moving, listening over the hiss of rain and the scrape of wood behind her for any sign of pursuit.

After a time, the tension begins to leave her, and she settles into a steadier pace. The deer is heavy, but the road is smooth enough.

She allows herself a smile.

Meat. Leather. Dust.

The traders start arriving tomorrow, and she has plenty to offer.