

The cold ones.

She sees them between the trees. Marching on. Laughing shadows. Brown hide and woolen cloaks. Spears with bronze tips and bows made out of wood and sinew.

Her breath turns shallow and her muscles tighten. She crawls slowly, over rock and stick, staying low to the ground to remain unseen. The sheep are quiet, thank the gods. Grazing peacefully far behind her.

*Why are they so close? These pale men wrapped in hide?*

Everyone fears the boundary. Even the cold ones. Cross and perish. Babies barely weaned know this.

At this time of year the boundary is even more apparent. Their side is marked by a layer of powdery snow. On her side the ground is still green and warm beneath her feet.

She crests a hill and sees it.

A dead deer lies straddled across the boundary, an arrow in its neck.

*They should leave it and let it rot. If they have any sense.*

The cold ones stop a few paces from the carcass, scanning their surroundings.

Her cheek touches soft moss as she presses herself even closer to the ground. Enduring the poke and prod from root and stone. Breathing in the earthy scent of wet leaves that turns her linen shorts and tunic damp.

From her vantage point on the bush covered hill she should not be seen.

That's what she tells herself as she lifts her head and takes a peek.

There are four of them together until there's not. A lone youth splinters from the group, moving towards the deer.

Towards her.

She takes note of any weapons as he draws close. A bow on his back and a knife at his belt.

When he reaches the boundary he hunches down, gazing at the dead deer at his feet.

It's always quiet at the boundary, there's no sounds beside the ones you make. So when he stops moving she takes care not to move herself, lest she alert him of her presence.

But when he removes his woolen hood she forgets herself. His hair is long and white like the snow behind him and his face is pretty, like a girl's.

She glances at her own hair, the black messy curls that hang limply in front of her face, moistened by the morning dew and smelling like the wet earth.

She moves closer to the edge, over branch and pebble.

A cracking sound reverberates around the silent forest as she breaks a branch beneath her body.

Chest and cheek meets the moss again. Her heart is loud in her ear.

After a long pause, a dragging sound interrupts the silence. Her cheek leaves the ground, and she looks.

"She's too curious for her own good", her mother always tells anyone who will listen. She's twelve years old and too bold not to look. So she looks.

He's dragging the deer by its hind legs, pulling the whole body over the boundary. The deer head soon leaves warm earth and sinks into cold snow.

His bronze knife flashes in the sun while he works. Cutting up the hide, pulling out the entrails.

After he's done, he throws what he pulled out over the boundary. Guts land in a bloody pile on the green warm ground. Her green warm ground. Her brow furrows as fear makes room for anger. It feels like disrespect.

Then he heaves the deer over his shoulders, leaving a trail of blood that stains the snow as he walks towards his people.

She waits a while, long after the cold ones vanish into the trees, before daring to move again. This time, however, there's no cautious slowness in her steps.

She jumps up and rushes down the hill, moving gracefully between sparse bushes until she comes upon the bloody pile. Scrunching her nose when the smell of blood and carcass hits her.

She doesn't know what to expect. Perhaps she thinks the entrails will disappear, disintegrate into dust.

But nothing happens. Nothing at all. She's almost disappointed. Until she sees something strange. A piece of deer hide lies beside the deer's stomach. It's been marked with a knife. The cold one must have carved on it, she realizes.

After a quick glance beyond the boundary, deeming it safe, she crouches down to take a closer look.

An arc is carved into the flesh. On top of that arc there's a crude carving of a figure, head, arms, body and legs, lying horizontally upon it.

It's a hill and a human.

He saw her.

She instinctively jumps back, almost losing her footing. Her gaze fixates beyond the boundary, half-expecting to see the youth with the dead deer on his shoulders, but there is nothing—only snow and dark trees.

A shiver goes down her spine and she turns around abruptly, breaking into a run. Her leather sandals leave deep prints in the soft clay earth that make up her path home. The deer hide carving and its creator leaves an imprint just as deep in her malleable mind.